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Beyond isolation: Examining social-emotional learning, relational engagement, and educational emancipation through the lens of Educated

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Abstract: Education is inherently a relational and socio-affective process whose effectiveness extends far beyond mere cognitive acquisition. When socio-emotional scaffolding is absent, distorted, or coercive, learning can degenerate into severe psychological distress and existential isolation. This paper analyzes Tara Westover's autobiographical memoir, *Educated* (2018), reframing it as a qualitative narrative critical case study. Through textual coding and theoretical triangulation, this study contrasts Westover's trajectory - from domestic isolation in a fundamentalist environment to earning a Ph.D. at Cambridge - with frameworks of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2000), attachment pedagogy (Bergin & Bergin, 2009), affective neuroscience (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007), and liberatory critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1991; Biesta, 2010). The article highlights how educators capable of emotional co-regulation and providing a "secure base" serve as an essential prerequisite for overcoming the traumas of culture shock and imposter syndrome. Finally, it addresses implications for designing contemporary learning environments (in-person, hybrid, and digital), emphasizing the need for trauma-informed pedagogical models that combine high cognitive challenge with robust socio-affective support.

Keywords: Social-emotional Learning; relational engagement; educational emancipation; narrative case study; self-determination theory;

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1. Introduction

Education is fundamentally a relational and socio-affective process rather than a mere dynamic of cognitive acquisition. At its core, meaningful learning depends upon emotional security, interpersonal trust, the cultivation of empathy, and a strong sense of belonging within a supportive educational community (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Durlak et al., 2011). When these socio-affective pillars are absent or distorted, the process of acquiring knowledge can become a site of intense emotional conflict, existential isolation, and psychological strain.

In this educational inquiry, Tara Westover's autobiographical memoir, *Educated* (2018), is not utilized merely as a literary narrative, but is methodologically reframed and examined as a rigorous qualitative narrative case study (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Riessman, 2008). As an autobiographical memoir, Westover's text offers a unique, rich corpus of lived experiences that functions as an empirical case study of

EDIZIONI UNIVERSITARIE ROMANE
editoria scientifica dal 1952

educational transformation unfolding in the stark absence of formal institutional schooling and constructive social-emotional scaffolding. Raised in an isolated, survivalist family unit in rural Idaho, Westover's early life was marked by severe physical hazards, ideological dogmatism, and systemic socio-emotional isolation. Her initial informal "education" was defined not by collaborative inquiry or empathetic guidance, but by familial coercion, severe emotional manipulation, physical abuse, and gaslighting.

Westover's trajectory - from total domestic isolation to earning a doctorate at the University of Cambridge - serves as the primary case for examining the profound interplay between student engagement, relational dynamics, and social-emotional learning (SEL). Treating her memoir as a case study highlights a critical paradox: while self-directed intellectual curiosity can drive extraordinary academic achievement, true educational emancipation requires navigating and healing profound relational ruptures (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Biesta, 2010).

This paper uses Westover's narrative case to interrogate contemporary theoretical and empirical models of SEL, classroom climate, teacher-student relationships, and emotional co-regulation. By systematically analyzing the empirical evidence provided within this autobiographical case study and contrasting her initial experiences of severe relational isolation with established socio-affective frameworks, this study explores how relational engagement functions across physical, hybrid, and digital learning environments to foster genuine student well-being, psychological safety, and autonomous agency.

2. Materials and Methods

This contribution adopts a qualitative narrative research methodology and grounds its epistemological structure on case study analysis (*qualitative narrative case study*, Flyvbjerg, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Within the fields of pedagogy and the human sciences, an autobiographical memoir constitutes a primary source of extraordinary heuristic value: the subjectively narrated experience is not approached as mere fiction or an idyllic narrative, but is elevated to a critical case study (*critical case study*) suited to uncovering underlying regularities, discontinuities, and deep dynamics related to educational processes and socio-emotional development. Specifically, Tara Westover's autobiographical memoir, *Educated* (2018) / *L'educazione* (2018), serves as the primary unit of analysis for this study. Treating the text as a case study entails subjecting it to a rigorous empirical-interpretive investigation, structured through the following operational phases:

1. Case bounding and contextualization: The case under examination investigates the phenomenon of transition from an informal, isolated, and traumatic learning context to a formal higher education environment of academic excellence, focusing on the relational, emotional, and epistemic dynamics of the experience.

2. Data extraction and thematic coding: Testimonies, key events, verbal interactions, and dialogues reported in the memoir were treated as empirical evidence and extracted through thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008). The primary coding

EDIZIONI UNIVERSITARIE ROMANE
editoria scientifica dal 1952

categories addressed: *a)* primary socio-affective deprivation and relational isolation; *b)* systemic violence, gaslighting, and epistemic control; *c)* the impact of culture shock and sense of estrangement within formal education; *d)* the presence of bridge figures and the transformative role of "secure bases" (*critical incidents*); and *e)* the process of identity reconstruction, relational rupture, and critical emancipation (*conscientização*).

3. Theoretical and hermeneutic triangulation: The data extracted from the narrative case study were brought into dialogue and triangulated with established theoretical frameworks of socio-emotional development and pedagogy: Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), Attachment Theory applied to instruction (Bowlby, 1982; Bergin & Bergin, 2009), affective neurosciences of learning (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007), cognitive and emotional load theory (Sweller, 1988), the prosocial classroom model (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), and liberatory/transformative critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1991; Biesta, 2010).

4. Analytical generalizability: In alignment with case study methodology (Flyvbjerg, 2006), the findings derived from Westover's memoir do not aim for statistical generalization, but rather for *analytical and conceptual generalization*, offering interpretive models transferable to understanding classroom dynamics and designing inclusive, sustainable, and trauma-informed learning environments.

As this study consists of the methodological and theoretical analysis of a publicly available published autobiographical work, formal approval from an ethics committee for human subject research was not required.

3. Results

The analysis conducted on the autobiographical memoir conceptualized as a case study allows for the isolation of empirical-narrative evidence and its articulation into five in-depth analytical sub-sections.

3.1. Primary socio-affective deficit and the absence of co-regulation

Within the case study represented by Westover's early childhood and adolescence, the domestic environment emerges as a closed, dogmatic system severely isolated from the broader social and institutional fabric. Textual analysis reveals that knowledge was not co-constructed through dialogue or free exploration, but rather imposed through mechanisms of ideological and religious coercion. In the family context examined in this case, the absence of external pedagogical figures and peers resulted in a total lack of emotional co-regulation experiences - the essential intersubjective process through which a significant adult helps a child interpret, modulate, and normalize physiological and psychological stress states (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). Familial gaslighting and epistemic manipulation are distinctly evident in the narrative data extracted from the text. Tara's father constructs a Manichean narrative that invalidates any alternative interpretation of reality:

EDIZIONI UNIVERSITARIE ROMANE
editoria scientifica dal 1952

"*My father's universe was simple. There were two forces: the Lord and the Devil. Everything that did not come from the Lord came from the Devil. Everything.*" (Westover, 2018, p. 28)

This rigid epistemic dichotomy transforms natural curiosity and learning into existential threats. Deprived of any interaction with educational institutions or socio-emotional support figures, Westover internalizes the conviction that her autonomous perception of her lived experiences and body is fallacious. When her older brother Shawn begins subjecting her to systemic physical and psychological violence, the family context applies a violent restructuring of reality, denying the evidence of abuse and forcing Tara into methodical self-doubt:

"Shawn had called me a whore, and I had believed him. I knew what a whore was: someone who didn't obey her father, who didn't stay in the kitchen, who looked at men. I had done all those things." (Westover, 2018, p. 118)

The absence of a socio-emotional support network and affective scaffolding transforms the home into a cage of systemic isolation, wherein the learner's mind is conditioned to reject immediate experience in favor of the truth dictated by coercive authority.

3.2. The impact of socio-emotional deficits upon entering formal education: trauma and institutional isolation

The case analysis registers a dramatic turning point when Westover enters formal education for the first time at Brigham Young University (BYU) at age seventeen. Lacking prior schooling and missing the most fundamental social navigation skills, her primary difficulties are not cognitive-intellectual, but rather tied to profound relational illiteracy, an absence of institutional trust, and emotional overload. The encounter with the university environment triggers acute culture and cognitive shock. The absence of a shared social grammar and elementary historical knowledge is prototypically illustrated in a major critical incident highlighted by the textual analysis during her first art history lecture:

"I raised my hand. 'What's this word?' I asked. 'I don't know it.' [...] The professor stopped typing. He looked at me for a long moment. 'Is this a joke?' he said. 'Are you making fun of this?' [...] The word was Holocaust." (Westover, 2018, p. 156)

This episode demonstrates how socio-cultural deprivation is not merely a lack of facts, but ignites devastating feelings of shame, humiliation, and emotional paralysis. The inability to decode the academic community's language activates psychological defense mechanisms, driving Westover toward complete social withdrawal. Fear that her "true nature," compounded by her ignorance of social conventions, will be exposed fosters constant imposter syndrome and a profound sense of radical alienation:

"I had spent my life learning to be silent, to suppress my own voice so as not to draw my father's wrath. Now, surrounded by students who raised their hands with ease and spoke with authority, I felt invisible, a ghost haunting a room of real people." (Westover, 2018, p. 164)

Tara's isolation at the university is not merely geographical or social, but intrapsychic: living in a state of constant stress activation and hypervigilance learned in her traumatic background, her cognitive resources are continuously drained by managing perceived threats, initially preventing her from fully benefiting from educational opportunities.

3.3. The transformative role of helping relationships, co-regulation, and "secure bases"

The case study analysis reveals that the decisive turning point in Westover's learning journey and identity restructuring occurs not through solitary study, but through the mediation of empathetic, socio-emotionally skilled helping relationships. Professor Kerry, a history instructor at Brigham Young University, is the first to identify Tara's intellectual potential, looking past her defensive posture to offer unconditional recognition. Kerry acts as a true "secure base" (Bergin & Bergin, 2009), encouraging her to apply for a study program at the University of Cambridge and providing emotional support that balances the rigor of academic expectations. At Cambridge, her encounter with historian Jonathan Steinberg represents the crucial critical incident of her entire emancipatory trajectory. Steinberg does not merely evaluate the formal quality of her essays; he perceives Tara's deep internal fracture and her persistent belief in her own worthlessness. The dialogue recorded in the memoir serves as an extraordinary example of co-regulation and positive emotional mirroring:

"'You are not fake gold,' he said, 'that shines only in the light of the hall. Whomever you become, whatever you make yourself into, that is who you always were. It was already in you. It's not golden leaf, it's solid gold.'" (Westover, 2018, p. 241)

The psychological impact of this emotional validation is profound. Westover highlights the liberating effect of those words on her personality structure:

"Professor Steinberg had given me something I had never possessed: the right to see myself as capable, as worthy of being heard. For the first time, I felt that my mind was not a defect to be hidden, but a tool to be used." (Westover, 2018, p. 243)

The presence of a reference figure capable of offering unconditional acceptance and validating the learner's competence enables Tara to make the fundamental transition from emotional paralysis to the activation of her epistemic agency.

3.4. Autobiographical writing and the attainment of a critical voice

As the relational support of these "secure bases" heals the wound of inadequacy, Westover begins utilizing writing and scientific research as instruments to investigate her personal history and social reality. The shift from passively endured learning to critical, transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) materializes when Tara chooses to focus her doctoral dissertation on analyzing utopian and fundamentalist streams of thought, applying historical rigor to the very ideological constructs that dominated her childhood. The attainment of her "voice" coincides with her ability to articulate an autonomous interpretation of the world, overcoming the fear of paternal

retribution. Westover describes this crucial milestone in terms of epistemic liberation:

"I had written a paper, but what I had really done was claim the right to think. I had spent my whole life being told what to think by my father. Now, for the first time, I was the author of my own thoughts." (Westover, 2018, p. 256)

Scientific inquiry and critical analysis become mechanisms of self-defense and reclamation of her history, demonstrating that high-level cognitive development is inextricably bound to the maturation of emotional security and personal autonomy.

3.5. Emancipation as relational rupture and identity reconstruction

The outcome of the case study reveals with stark realism that educational emancipation is not a cumulative, painless process, but often carries the painful necessity of navigating severe relational ruptures with one's origin system. Westover's adherence to historical truth, science, and independent judgment triggers a defensive reaction from her family, presenting her with an ultimatum: surrender her voice and submit once again to paternal authority, or be completely severed from the family unit.

Facing the threat of being disowned and branded as "possessed by the devil," Westover chooses to preserve the integrity of her hard-won mind and identity. The textual analysis underscores the suffering caused by this rupture, alongside her awareness of its pedagogical inevitability:

"You can love someone and still choose to say goodbye to them. You can miss a person every day, and still be glad that they are no longer in your life." (Westover, 2018, p. 328)

The concluding reflection ending the memoir serves as the culmination of the entire case study and encapsulates the very definition of liberatory, emancipatory education:

"Guilt is the fear of one's own wretchedness. It has nothing to do with other people. [...] You could call this selfhood many things. Transformation. Metamorphosis. Falsity. Betrayal. I call it an education." (Westover, 2018, p. 328-329)

In Westover's experience, education is thus not merely the accumulation of academic credentials, but the attainment of selfhood - a process requiring the courage to risk losing original belonging to gain freedom of thought.

4. Discussion

The interpretation of the findings emerging from the in-depth case study analysis of Educated offers significant avenues for pedagogical discussion in light of scientific theories of education, developmental psychology, and neuroscience.

4.1. Theoretical and epistemological synthesis: relational engagement and SEL

Reading Westover's narrative as a qualitative case study allows for the concrete validation, triangulation, and exemplification of several fundamental theoretical constructs in educational research.

A. Self-determination theory (SDT) and basic psychological needs

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) postulates that individual well-being, intrinsic motivation, and deep learning occur exclusively through the integrated satisfaction of three basic psychological needs:

1. Autonomy: The need to perceive oneself as the causal agent of one's own life and choices.

2. Competence: The need to feel effective in one's interactions with the social and cognitive environment.

3. Relatedness: The need to experience a sense of belonging, feeling connected to and significant to others within a community.

In Westover's case study, the original family system systematically violated all three needs. Relatedness was leveraged as a tool for blackmail: family belonging was granted only on the condition of surrendering autonomy of thought and foregoing the exercise of competence outside domestic dogma. When Westover enters higher education, the initial lack of relatedness paralyzes her autonomy. Only when educators (Kerry, Steinberg) offer her a form of relatedness free from coercive conditions - validating her intellectual competence - can her need for autonomy finally emerge, triggering powerful intrinsic motivation and elevating her sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

B. Attachment theory, "secure bases," and emotional co-regulation

Extending the principles of Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1982) to educational contexts, Bergin and Bergin (2009) demonstrate that the quality of the teacher-student relationship constitutes a decisive factor for learning. When the home environment fails to provide a secure attachment, the teacher has the opportunity to function as a "secondary secure base" or a "surrogate attachment figure." The function of a secure base is to reduce the learner's perceived level of threat, enabling them to venture into exploring the unknown and to take cognitive risks (asking questions, admitting ignorance, formulating hypotheses). As highlighted by affective neuroscience (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007), mind and body, emotion and cognition are inextricably intertwined: prolonged activation of the amygdala and the stress response stems from perceptions of relational insecurity, which in turn inhibits the executive functions of the prefrontal cortex responsible for abstraction, critical reasoning, and working memory (Sweller, 1988). The emotional co-regulation practiced by empathetic teachers deactivates the threat response, restoring optimal neurobiological conditions for high-level cognitive learning.

C. The prosocial classroom and trauma-informed pedagogy

The Prosocial Classroom model (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) emphasizes that a teacher's socio-emotional competence and the establishment of a classroom climate characterized by relational support and procedural justice are essential to preventing student disengagement and burnout. In the case of learners coming from highly traumatic or deprived backgrounds (as with Westover), traditional instructional practices focused solely on performance risk re-traumatizing the student. Trauma-informed pedagogy (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) requires educational institutions to recognize manifestations of hypervigilance, dissociation, or defensive aggressiveness not as moral flaws or a lack of effort, but as adaptive responses to past dysfunctional environments. Educational intervention thus transforms into a practice of containment, clear structuring, and patient decoding of the learning community's codes.

D. Critical pedagogy, transformative learning, and emancipation

From the perspective of general pedagogy, Westover's trajectory finds its deepest contextualization within Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy (1970). Freire radically contrasts the "banking model" of education - where the educator unidirectionally and dogmatically deposits facts into the passive mind of the learner - with problem-posing, liberatory education rooted in dialogue and critical consciousness (conscientização). The informal family education imposed on Tara during childhood represents the most extreme and violent form of the banking model. Her entry into university and her attainment of critical writing embody Transformative Learning theory (Mezirow, 1991). Transformative learning occurs when an individual encounters a "disorienting dilemma" - such as the Holocaust episode for Westover - that challenges their prior frames of reference. Through critical reflection on implicit assumptions and the renegotiation of underlying premises, the subject arrives at a new perspective of meaning, acquiring autonomous, democratic agency (Biesta, 2010).

4.2. Implications for contemporary learning environments: in-person, hybrid, and digital

The analytical generalization derived from Tara Westover's case study provides operational insights of primary importance for designing today's instructional contexts, shaped by transformations across in-person, hybrid, and digital modalities.

A. Fostering classroom climate, psychological safety, and relational justice

Establishing a classroom climate characterized by psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) is an indispensable prerequisite for fostering the inclusion of vulnerable, marginalized, or traumatized students. Educators must deliberately design environments where:

- Initial errors and ignorance are neither sanctioned nor ridiculed, but welcomed as natural, transparent stages of the inquiry process.
- Principles of relational justice and respect for the diversity of biographical histories are applied.

- The "implicit grammar" of the institution (how to pose a question, access support services, or structure a critical study) is made explicit, preventing background cultural capital from becoming an insurmountable barrier.

B. Preventing isolation and fostering engagement in digital and hybrid contexts

The acceleration toward digital learning, e-learning platforms, and blended environments carries the latent risk of reproducing forms of socio-emotional isolation and alienation similar to those experienced by Westover in her original context. Physical distance and screen mediation can amplify feelings of estrangement, imposter syndrome, and existential loneliness. To counteract "digital detachment," instructional design cannot be reduced to the mere uploading of video lectures or slides, but must incorporate the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison et al., 2000), balancing three fundamental presences:

1. Social Presence: The ability of participants to project themselves socially and emotionally into the virtual community, expressing their authentic personalities.

2. Teaching Presence: The continuous design, facilitation, and guidance provided by the instructor, who does not disappear behind the screen but offers regular feedback and affective check-ins.

3. Cognitive Presence: The extent to which learners are able to construct meaning through sustained reflection and collaborative dialogue.

Integrating synchronous moments dedicated to listening, cooperative learning activities, empathetically moderated discussion forums, and personalized tutorial support channels constitute essential safeguards to ensure that digital spaces foster authentic connection rather than further relational deprivation.

C. Teacher training in trauma-informed pedagogy and co-regulation

The Westover case study demonstrates that a teacher's disciplinary and subject-matter expertise is wholly insufficient if divorced from adequate socio-emotional competence. There is an urgent need to incorporate dedicated modules on trauma-informed pedagogy into initial and ongoing teacher education:

- Developing the capacity to recognize signs of emotional distress, dysregulation, defensive withdrawal, or performance anxiety.

- Providing practical co-regulation tools, such as calm classroom conflict management, active listening, empathetic mirroring, and workload adjustment during crises.

- Promoting awareness of one's own emotional state (teacher emotional self-regulation), as a stressed or exhausted educator cannot serve as a secure base for their students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

D. Dynamic balance between high cognitive challenge and high socio-affective support

High-quality teaching rejects both welfare paternalism (which lowers cognitive expectations, depriving students of intellectual challenge) and unfeeling bureaucratic rigorism (which imposes high standards without offering support). As demonstrated by Westover's trajectory at Cambridge, emancipation occurs exclusively at the virtuous intersection of high cognitive expectations and high socio-affective support. The educator must believe in the student's potential even before the student believes in it themselves, while simultaneously providing the emotional scaffolding necessary to sustain the effort required for educational growth.

5. Conclusions

The analysis of Tara Westover's autobiographical memoir, conceptualized and conducted in all respects as a qualitative narrative case study, provides robust empirical-experiential validation of the core principles of social-emotional learning, attachment psychology, and relational, emancipatory pedagogy. The case demonstrates that while self-directed learning, individual determination, and intellectual curiosity can spark the initial desire for knowledge, it is exclusively the mediation of empathetic, containing, and non-judgmental educational relationships that enables authentic and lasting human emancipation.

Westover's trajectory clearly underscores that education is never a mere accumulation of academic credits or the passive assimilation of neutral information. Authentic learning engages the whole person - their history, traumas, affective bonds, and core structures of identity. When education requires challenging one's original frames of reference, it inevitably generates crisis and psychological distress; it is precisely at this crucial juncture that the presence of welcoming institutions and educators capable of acting as "secure bases" and agents of emotional co-regulation delineates the fine line between failure/withdrawal and transformative metamorphosis.

In conclusion, this study reaffirms that contemporary pedagogical research and practice cannot yield to a reductionist, hyper-specialized, or purely performance-driven view of education. In the physical spaces of the classroom as well as in the complex environments of hybrid and digital learning, the rigorous cultivation of relationships, the fostering of psychological safety, the presence of figures capable of emotional co-regulation, and the building of prosocial learning communities remain the indispensable and ethically foundational conditions for education to fulfill its highest promise: freeing the mind while simultaneously ensuring the care, dignity, and full flourishing of the human person.

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