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The city that educates: genealogy, contemporary grammars and tensions of the educating city concept

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A cidade que educa: genealogia, gramáticas contemporâneas e tensões do conceito de cidade educadora

RESUMO

Objetivo – examinar como o conceito de cidade educadora se formou e como vem sendo mobilizado na produção científica de 2021 a 2026, para propor critérios que permitam distinguir seu uso analítico de seu uso apenas declaratório no planejamento e na gestão urbana.

Metodologia – ensaio teórico apoiado em revisão crítica de literatura com busca e seleção sistematizadas. A busca na base Crossref, feita em 21 de novembro de 2026 com nove descritores em português, espanhol e inglês, examinou os 25 primeiros resultados de cada descritor (225 registros, 211 únicos). A triagem por título e resumo selecionou 36 trabalhos, e uma busca complementar dirigida acrescentou 3, o que formou um corpus de 39 trabalhos de 2021 a 2026 (24 em periódicos estrangeiros e 15 em brasileiros). A análise baseou-se nos resumos e metadados registrados, sem leitura integral dos textos, o que é assumido como limitação, e foi feita em diálogo com clássicos da educação permanente, da pedagogia urbana e do direito à cidade.

Originalidade/relevância – a literatura sobre cidades educadoras cresceu sobretudo no campo da educação, com relatos de experiência e pouca discussão sobre a dimensão espacial do conceito; o artigo desloca a pergunta da escola para a produção do espaço urbano e examina o que a cidade ensina pela forma como é planejada, distribuída e governada.

Resultados – identificam-se quatro gramáticas no uso recente do conceito (escolar-territorial, cívico-participativa, socioambiental-climática e cultural e de direitos) e quatro tensões que atravessam todas elas: educação na cidade ou pela cidade, selo ou política, consenso ou conflito, e programa ou espaço.

Contribuições teóricas/metodológicas – propõem-se uma definição operativa de cidade educadora e um quadro de seis critérios de leitura crítica (intencionalidade, transversalidade, espacialização, participação deliberativa, justiça socioespacial e continuidade avaliada), aplicáveis à análise de planos, programas e adesões municipais.

Contribuições sociais e ambientais – o quadro ajuda gestores, conselhos e pesquisadores a avaliar se a adesão ao ideário das cidades educadoras altera a distribuição de espaços públicos, de oportunidades formativas e de poder de decisão, inclusive nas respostas locais à crise climática.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Cidade educadora. Educação não formal. Direito à cidade. Planejamento urbano. Espaço público.

The city that educates: genealogy, contemporary grammars and tensions of the educating city concept

ABSTRACT

Objective – To examine how the educating city concept took shape and how it has been used in scientific literature from 2021 to 2026, in order to propose criteria that separate its analytical use from merely declaratory uses in urban planning and management.

Methodology – A theoretical essay based on a critical literature review with systematized search and selection. A Crossref search, run on 21 November 2026 with nine descriptors in Portuguese, Spanish and English, examined the first 25 results for each descriptor (225 records, 211 unique). Title and abstract screening selected 36 works, and a targeted complementary search added 3, forming a corpus of 39 works from 2021 to 2026 (24 in foreign journals and 15 in Brazilian journals). The analysis relied on the registered abstracts and metadata, without full-text reading, which is acknowledged as a limitation, and was carried out in dialogue with classic works on lifelong education, urban pedagogy and the right to the city.

Originality/Relevance – Research on educating cities has grown mainly within education studies, largely through experience reports and with little attention to the spatial dimension of the concept; the article shifts the question from the school to the production of urban space and asks what the city teaches through the way it is planned, distributed and governed.

Results – Four grammars are identified in recent uses of the concept (school-territorial, civic-participatory, socio-environmental and climate-related, and cultural and rights-based), together with four tensions that run across all of them: education in the city or through the city, label or policy, consensus or conflict, and programme or space.

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Theoretical/Methodological Contributions – The article proposes an operational definition of the educating city and a framework of six criteria for critical reading (intentionality, transversality, spatialization, deliberative participation, socio-spatial justice and evaluated continuity), applicable to the analysis of municipal plans, programmes and memberships.
Social and Environmental Contributions – The framework helps managers, councils and researchers assess whether joining the educating cities movement changes the distribution of public spaces, learning opportunities and decision-making power, including in local responses to the climate crisis.

KEYWORDS: Educating city. Non-formal education. Right to the city. Urban planning. Public space.

La ciudad que educa: genealogía, gramáticas contemporáneas y tensiones del concepto de ciudad educadora

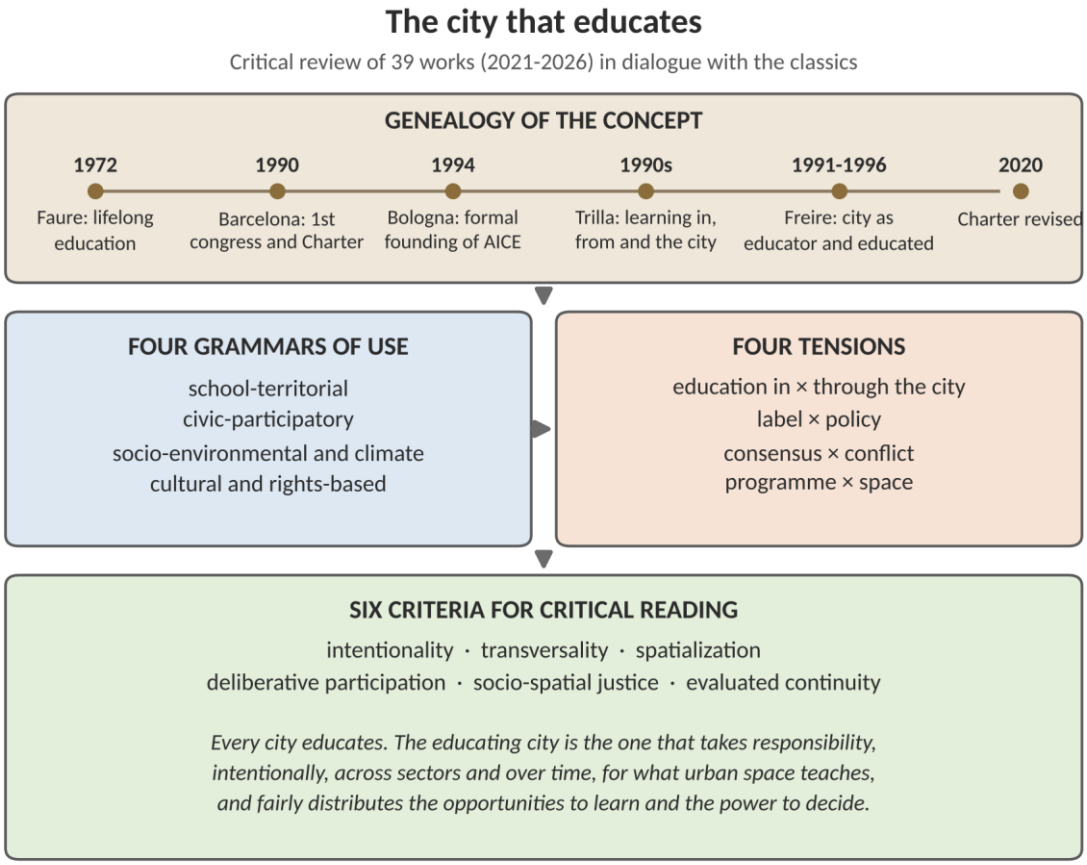
RESUMEN
Objetivo – examinar cómo se formó el concepto de ciudad educadora y cómo ha sido movilizado en la producción científica de 2021 a 2026, para proponer criterios que permitan distinguir su uso analítico de su uso meramente declarativo en la planificación y la gestión urbana.
Metodología – ensayo teórico apoyado en una revisión crítica de literatura con búsqueda y selección sistematizadas. La búsqueda en la base Crossref, realizada el 21 de noviembre de 2026 con nueve descriptores en portugués, español e inglés, examinó los 25 primeros resultados de cada descriptor (225 registros, 211 únicos). El cribado por título y resumen seleccionó 36 trabajos, y una búsqueda complementaria dirigida añadió 3, lo que formó un corpus de 39 trabajos de 2021 a 2026 (24 en revistas extranjeras y 15 en brasileñas). El análisis se basó en los resúmenes y metadatos registrados, sin lectura del texto completo, lo que se asume como limitación, y se realizó en diálogo con clásicos de la educación permanente, la pedagogía urbana y el derecho a la ciudad.
Originalidad/relevancia – la literatura sobre ciudades educadoras creció sobre todo en el campo de la educación, con relatos de experiencias y poca discusión sobre la dimensión espacial del concepto; el artículo desplaza la pregunta de la escuela a la producción del espacio urbano y examina lo que la ciudad enseña por la manera en que se planifica, se distribuye y se gobierna.
Resultados – se identifican cuatro gramáticas en el uso reciente del concepto (escolar-territorial, cívico-participativa, socioambiental-climática y cultural y de derechos) y cuatro tensiones que las atraviesan: educación en la ciudad o por la ciudad, sello o política, consenso o conflicto, y programa o espacio.
Contribuciones teóricas/metodológicas – se proponen una definición operativa de ciudad educadora y un cuadro de seis criterios de lectura crítica (intencionalidad, transversalidad, espacialización, participación deliberativa, justicia socioespacial y continuidad evaluada), aplicables al análisis de planes, programas y adhesiones municipales.
Contribuciones sociales y ambientales – el cuadro ayuda a gestores, consejos e investigadores a evaluar si la adhesión al ideario de las ciudades educadoras modifica la distribución de espacios públicos, de oportunidades formativas y de poder de decisión, incluso en las respuestas locales a la crisis climática.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Ciudad educadora. Educación no formal. Derecho a la ciudad. Planificación urbana. Espacio público.

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GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



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1 INTRODUCTION

Every city educates. It educates when it offers libraries, squares and schools close to home, and it also educates when it withholds them, when it separates neighbourhoods by income, when it turns the street into a corridor for cars or when it teaches children that public space is dangerous. The idea that the urban environment shapes people, for better and for worse, is an old one, but it acquired the status of a political programme just over three decades ago. In 1990, the First International Congress of Educating Cities, held in Barcelona, approved the Charter of Educating Cities; in 1994, at the Bologna congress, the International Association of Educating Cities (AICE, its acronym in Spanish and Portuguese) was formally constituted. The charter was revised in 1994, 2004 and 2020 (AICE, 2020), and the network has grown to around five hundred municipalities worldwide. In March 2020, São Gabriel, in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, became the 505th member city and the 21st in Brazil (Pastorio; Pastorio; Moll, 2021).

The growth of the network was accompanied by a growth in academic output. Recent reviews describe a large body of literature, but one concentrated on reports of municipal experiences, with little evaluation of results and with the concept often used as a generic frame for educational activities outside school (Bacila, 2021; Alvarenga; Kuestra; Quaresma, 2023). An analysis of 47 experiences highlighted by the AICE itself found strong adherence to principles such as lifelong learning and access to culture, but a weak presence of sustainability, social responsibility and citizen participation, as well as fragile policy formulation and evaluation stages (Kuestra Pereira; Alvarenga; Quaresma, 2026). The idea, it seems, has spread faster than our ability to state precisely what distinguishes an educating city from a city that simply has good education policies.

There is a second, less discussed gap. Born in the field of pedagogy, the concept has seldom been questioned from the standpoint of urban studies. In many studies the city appears as the setting in which education takes place, and not as an object that education itself helps to produce and that, once produced, educates. This omission has consequences. If the city teaches through the way it distributes schools, green areas, transport and housing, then urban planning is a pedagogical practice, even when it does not recognise itself as such (Quinto, 2021), and the question of the educating city comes to involve the master plan, the design of public space and the fair distribution of facilities (Simon; Farah; Merlin, 2021; Alves; Schmidt, 2024). In Brazil, this connection began to be made in urban and environmental management journals, which have related educating cities to cultural heritage, to the peripheral landscape and to sustainable societies (Gabriel; Vieira; Castral, 2022; Santos; Benini, 2024; Imbrunito; Paula, 2026), though still in a scattered way.

This article starts from that gap. It argues that the concept of the educating city gains analytical depth only when it is read as a property of the production of urban space, and not merely as an attribute of educational programmes. The 2020 charter itself points in this direction: its principle 11 deals with the planning of public space, accessibility, autonomy of movement and the needs of different groups (AICE, 2020). What is missing is to translate these commitments into criteria capable of examining where investments are located, who can reach

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the spaces and who influences decisions. This is the contribution the article seeks to make. To develop the argument, it reconstructs the genealogy of the concept, maps the ways it was used in the literature from 2021 to 2026, identifies the tensions that run through these uses and proposes criteria to distinguish analytical from declaratory uses.

2 OBJECTIVES

The general objective is to examine the formation and recent uses of the concept of the educating city, in order to propose criteria for critical reading applicable to urban planning and management. The specific objectives are: (a) to reconstruct the genealogy of the concept, from lifelong education to the AICE charter; (b) to identify the grammars through which the 2021-2026 literature mobilises the concept; (c) to discuss the theoretical and political tensions that run through these uses; and (d) to propose an operational definition and a set of criteria for assessing, in concrete cases, whether and how a city educates.

3 METHODOLOGY

The study is a theoretical essay based on a critical literature review with systematized search and selection. The choice follows from the type of question. The aim is not to measure the effectiveness of policies, which would require a different design, but to examine how a concept is built and used, which calls for an interpretive reading of a corpus delimited by explicit criteria.

The search was conducted in the Crossref database, which holds the metadata of documents with a DOI and covers Brazilian, Ibero-American and international journals. The final protocol was run on 21 November 2026 with the descriptors “cidades educadoras”, “cidade educadora”, “ciudades educadoras”, “ciudad educadora”, “educating cities”, “educating city”, “urban pedagogy”, “critical pedagogy of place” and “learning city”, filtered for journal articles published from 2021 to 2026. The database ranks results by bibliographic relevance and, for broad descriptors, returns tens or hundreds of thousands of records, most of them unrelated to the topic. For this reason, the first 25 results for each descriptor were examined, giving a total of 225 records. Duplicates were identified by DOI, which is unique to each document, reducing the set to 211 records. Screening by title and abstract excluded texts in which the expression appeared only in a literal sense (for example, the training of professionals in a given city), those dealing with pedagogy or learning unrelated to urban space, reviews, editorials and works without a recorded abstract. Included were texts that discussed the concept, a municipal experience in its light, or a related notion (urban pedagogy, learning city, critical pedagogy of place) with an explicit link to urban space. Screening selected 36 works, almost all from the Portuguese and Spanish descriptors and from “educating cities” and “educating city”; the descriptors “urban pedagogy”, “critical pedagogy of place” and “learning city” contributed two works, because their results dealt mostly with the classroom, higher education and continuing education. A targeted complementary search, with the terms “pedagogía urbana”, “learning cities UNESCO” and “right to the city education”, added three works that the main protocol had not reached (De Marco, 2025; Fakıbaba Dedeoğlu, 2026; Rocha; Cremaschi; Pereira de Lima,

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2026). The records examined, with descriptor, position and DOI, have been archived and can be made available to reviewers.

The final corpus comprised 39 works, 24 published in journals edited outside Brazil (in Europe, Latin America, Canada and Turkey) and 15 in Brazilian journals. The analysis was based on the titles, abstracts and metadata recorded in Crossref; none of the 39 works was read in full at this stage. This is the main limitation of the study, because an abstract reports the stated aim, method and results but does not allow the full argument or the quality of the evidence to be examined. The article therefore avoids attributing to the works in the corpus claims that are not in their abstracts and treats the grammars and tensions as interpretive hypotheses, to be tested through full reading. The analysis followed two steps. In the first, each work was coded according to the dimension of the concept it mobilises. The four grammars were not defined beforehand: they were built during the reading, through successive grouping of the codes assigned to the abstracts (school and territory, participation and governance, environment and climate, culture and rights) until each work could be associated with a predominant emphasis. In the second step, the works were reread in dialogue with classic texts on lifelong education (Faure *et al.*, 1972; Freire, 1993), non-formal education (Trilla; Ghanem, 2008; Trilla Bernet, 2015), public pedagogy and place-based pedagogy (Gruenewald, 2003; Biesta, 2012) and the right to the city (Lefebvre, 2001; Harvey, 2003), in order to identify tensions and formulate criteria. Chart 1 presents the corpus by grammar.

Chart 1 – Review corpus (2021-2026) by predominant grammar

Grammar	Emphasis	Works in the corpus
School-territorial	Open school, city curriculum, educational territories, school segregation	Bacila (2021); Aramendi Jáuregui, Rekalde-Rodríguez and Cruz Iglesias (2022); Essomba (2022); Alvarenga, Kuestra and Quaresma (2023); Alonso-Sanz, Braschi and Sebastianelli (2023); López Ávila (2023); Alves and Schmidt (2024); Tresserras Angulo, Lasarte Leonet and Garai Ibáñez de Elejalde (2024); Gesser and Stryhalski (2025); De Marco (2025)
Civic-participatory	Governance, master plan, children's councils, membership of the AICE	Benlloch (2021); Karam (2021); Simon, Farah and Merlin (2021); Pastorio, Pastorio and Moll (2021); Montebelli (2023); Fernández Méndez (2023); Zuin and Dias (2023); Vera Hernández, Pacheco Carmona and Hernández-Pulgarín (2025); Oliveira and Silva (2025); Kuestra Pereira, Alvarenga and Quaresma (2026); Jiménez Gámez (2026)
Socio-environmental and climate	Education for sustainability, critical environmental education, climate action, public space	Essomba *et al.* (2022); Santos and Benini (2024); Figueiredo and Caporlingua (2025); Carretta Diniz, Londero Brandli and Gasparetto Rebelatto (2026); Fakıbaba Dedeoğlu (2026); García and Marinero (2026)
Cultural and rights-based	Heritage, art, memory, disability, migration, critical urban pedagogy	Quinto (2021); Gabriel, Vieira and Castral (2022); Machado Bógus and Aires Magalhães (2022); Molina-Torres (2022); Ortiz and Millan (2022); Soares and Almeida (2022); Vieira and Silva (2023); Mesías-Lema *et al.* (2024); Salcedo Serna and Peñaloza Tello (2024); Imbrunito and Paula (2026); Pinto Sierra and Reyes-Ruiz (2026); Rocha, Cremaschi and Pereira de Lima (2026)

Source: Prepared by the authors (2026).

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The classification indicates the predominant emphasis, not an exclusive one. Several works move between grammars, and this overlap is itself a finding of the analysis. One example is the study by Alves and Schmidt (2024), which discusses the hospitable school and, at the same time, the right to the city. It could be read within the cultural and rights-based grammar, but it was classified as school-territorial because the school is its unit of analysis and the addressee of its proposals. The tie-break rule was always the same: the predominant grammar is the one that defines the problem and the main actor of the work, not the one that appears only in its theoretical framework.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Genealogy: from lifelong education to the charter of educating cities

The expression has a well-known origin. The report of the international commission chaired by Edgar Faure for UNESCO, published in 1972 under the title *Learning to be*, proposed that education should no longer be understood as a stage of life concentrated in school, but as a lifelong process distributed across all social institutions. On the horizon of this proposal was the learning society, in which the city, with its services, associations and media, would take on an explicit educational role (Faure *et al.*, 1972). The report arose from a crisis of the school, which could no longer cope with the expansion of demand and the speed of social change, and it responded by widening the place of education, not only that of the school.

Two decades later, Catalan pedagogy gave this intuition a more precise conceptual form. Trilla Bernet (2015), in a text that revisits the Barcelona conference, organised the relationship between education and the city into three dimensions that have become classic: learning *in* the city, which takes it as a context containing educational institutions and resources; learning *from* the city, which recognises it as an informal educational agent, a continuous source of messages and models; and learning *the* city, which turns it into content, an object of knowledge to be understood and transformed. The same author stressed that this educational function is ambivalent. The street teaches civility and also indifference, and for this reason the school, open and selectively permeable to its surroundings, has the obligation to be better than them (Trilla Bernet, 2015). The idea of a city that educates through its own urban, industrial and cultural history, and not only through its schools, was later described by those who lived it in local government, as in the account of Turin, one of the founding cities of the network (Alfieri, 2015). In the debate on formal and non-formal education, Trilla and Ghanem (2008) showed that the boundaries between the three educational spheres are less sharp than classifications suggest, and that the challenge for policy is to articulate them, not to replace one with another.

In Brazil, Paulo Freire gave the theme a political inflection of his own. As Municipal Secretary of Education of São Paulo between 1989 and 1991, he linked the reform of public schools to popular participation and to opening schools to the community (Freire, 1991). In his essays of the early 1990s, he formulated the idea that the city is at once educator and educated: it educates through the way it treats its inhabitants, the spaces it offers and the priorities it expresses in its budget, and it is educated by the action of the citizens who claim and transform it (Freire, 1993). This reciprocity, consistent with the Freirean view that no one educates anyone alone and that teaching requires recognising the knowledge of the other (Freire, 1996), removes

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any tone of tutelage from the concept. The city does not educate its citizens as a teacher who transmits content to passive students. It is both the product and the field of collective learning.

Gadotti (2006) summed up this reading by stating that a city can be considered educating when, in addition to its economic, social and political functions and its provision of services, it takes on education for and through citizenship as an objective, and by advocating a pedagogy of the city that can only be realised with the will of its citizens. The book edited by Gadotti, Padilha and Cabezudo (2004) brought together the first Latin American experiences and consolidated the Brazilian reception of the movement. In the same direction, Brazilian legislation had recognised since 1996 that education encompasses "the formative processes that take place in family life, in human coexistence, at work, in teaching and research institutions, in social movements and civil society organisations and in cultural manifestations" (Brasil, 1996, art. 1, our translation), and the City Statute made democratic management a guideline of urban policy (Brasil, 2001, art. 2, II). The two frameworks have rarely been read together, although the intersection between them is the very ground of the educating city.

The 2000s added the strand of full-time integral education to this genealogy. Experiences of extended school days in Belo Horizonte and Santarém took projects to squares, parks and rivers, understood as educational territories, and linked the right to education to a sense of belonging to the city (Leite, 2012). The educating cities agenda found a concrete institutional translation there, albeit one dependent on federal programmes with unstable funding.

Finally, two international lineages ran in parallel and only recently began to engage with the AICE movement. The first is that of learning cities, promoted by UNESCO, which emphasises lifelong learning as a driver of inclusion, prosperity and sustainability and proposes indicators for local governments (Osborne; Kearns; Yang, 2013). The second is the critical pedagogy of place, which combines critical pedagogy with place-based education and proposes two simultaneous aims, decolonisation and reinhabitation, that is, recognising the power relations inscribed in the territory and learning to live in it in an ecologically responsible way (Gruenewald, 2003). To these one may add the notion of public pedagogy, through which Biesta (2012) distinguishes a pedagogy *for* the public, which teaches citizens how to behave, from a pedagogy *of* the public, which forms citizens, and from a pedagogy concerned with publicness itself, that is, with the moments in which ordinary people become public by acting together. The distinction is useful for the argument of this article, because it allows us to separate the city that trains from the city that educates.

These lineages now coexist with neighbouring labels that should be distinguished. UNESCO's learning city and the AICE's educating city share a reference to lifelong education, but they start from different emphases. The former is organised around learning as a resource for inclusion, employability and local prosperity, with a strong appeal to indicators and to partnerships with the productive sector (Osborne; Kearns; Yang, 2013). The latter stems from a charter of principles centred on the right to education and on the responsibility of local government for all policies with formative effects (AICE, 2020; Essomba, 2022). The children's city proposal, in turn, takes childhood as a yardstick of urban quality and turns listening to

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children into a planning criterion (Tonucci; Rissotto, 2001). The three labels often intersect in municipal practice, and recent literature has begun to analyse them together (Fakıbaba Dedeoğlu, 2026). The difference matters, however, because each defines differently who learns, what counts as a result and who is accountable for it. In this article, the educating city is treated as the broadest of the three, precisely because the AICE charter extends educational responsibility to local government as a whole, beyond the provision of learning opportunities.

4.2 Four grammars in the recent use of the concept

Reading the corpus makes it possible to identify four grammars, understood as recurrent ways of defining the problem, the actors and what counts as a result. They are not closed theoretical schools but regularities of use.

School-territorial grammar. This is the oldest grammar, a direct heir of the debate on the open school, and it accounts for 10 of the 39 works in the corpus. Here the educating city is, above all, a renewed relationship between the school and its surroundings. Alves and Schmidt (2024) argue that the contemporary school must not only open up but go out into the world and become hospitable, and that the right to the city, especially the use of public and private spaces, can become an instrument of the right to the educating city. Essomba (2022) proposes the City Educational Project as the axis that articulates the shared educational responsibility of local actors. In Bogotá, a public secondary school turned the district's educating city policy into a curriculum that treats every space in the city as a learning opportunity (López Ávila, 2023), and Gesser and Stryhalski (2025) advocate the co-creation of curricula between school and city as a strategy for social sustainability. Experiences such as the school walk through the Corviale housing complex in Rome show the school using the periphery as content and as a partner in a project of architectural transformation (Alonso-Sanz; Braschi; Sebastianelli, 2023), and the municipal nursery schools of Vitoria-Gasteiz appear as a pedagogical model grounded in commitment to the community (Tresserras Angulo; Lasarte Leonet; Garai Ibáñez de Elejalde, 2024). The strongest point of this grammar, however, comes from a study on school segregation. In 21 Spanish educating cities, municipal technical staff associated segregation with income, housing and urban planning factors, such as the location of family homes and the proximity of schools (Aramendi Jáuregui; Rekalde-Rodríguez; Cruz Iglesias, 2022). The inequality that schools cannot correct on their own originates, in part, in the geography of the city.

Civic-participatory grammar. With 11 works, this grammar treats the educating city above all as a way of governing. The emphasis is on participation, democratic management and the building of civic capacities. The most studied case is Rosario, in Argentina, where the Children's Councils, created in 1997, brought childhood in as an agent of reflection on the territory (Fernández Méndez, 2023), in line with Tonucci and Rissotto's (2001) argument that children's participation improves the city for everyone and teaches technical staff a new sensitivity. In Porto Velho, the revision of the master plan was read as a communicative and educational process (Zuin; Dias, 2023), and Simon, Farah and Merlin (2021) proposed bringing master plans closer to the principles of educating cities in the post-pandemic context. In Mexico City, the Arts and Crafts Factories (FAROS) were read as a form of popular and non-formal education that combines citizen participation and urban communication (Karam, 2021), and

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Benlloch (2021) proposed extending the educating city perspective to public policies for rural contexts, which shows that the concept does not depend on the size of the settlement. In Italy, two participatory planning laboratories showed that knowledge of the territory is a condition for a citizenry able to intervene in decisions about space (Montebelli, 2023). In Colombia, the accession of Manizales to the AICE was analysed as an achievement of urban governance and city diplomacy (Vera Hernández; Pacheco Carmona; Hernández-Pulgarín, 2025). The same grammar, however, reveals its limits. In the Brazilian state of Bahia, education legislation mentions the relationship between city and education, but no document states how it would be put into practice (Oliveira; Silva, 2025), and the analysis of AICE experiences shows that citizen participation is among the least present principles (Kuestra Pereira; Alvarenga; Quaresma, 2026).

Socio-environmental and climate grammar. This grammar has the fewest works in the corpus (6), but three of them date from 2026, which suggests a recent rapprochement with the climate agenda, although the sample adopted does not allow a trend to be inferred. Essomba *et al.* (2022), studying Barcelona, Changwon and Rosario, concluded that educating cities are suitable frameworks for tackling three problems of education for sustainable development: the gap between policy and practice, the lack of a transformative approach and the hegemony of formal education. Figueiredo and Caporlingua (2025) brought the concept closer to critical environmental education, which exposes the causes of socio-environmental problems and encourages intervention in reality. Santos and Benini (2024) analysed Brazilian member cities of the network and showed that practices such as the use of green spaces, waste management and social technologies serve as means of integrating education, sustainability and active citizenship. The most recent development is climate action. A panel of Brazilian experts assessed twenty actions derived from the AICE charter and found consensus on the relevance and urgency of almost all of them, such as participatory risk diagnosis and cross-cutting climate education, but only four of the twenty actions exceeded the experts' threshold of perceived feasibility, which exposes a structural gap between priorities and municipal capacity (Carretta Diniz; Londero Brandli; Gasparetto Rebelatto, 2026). In San Juan, Argentina, visual communication was used to translate the educating cities' commitment to balance with the natural environment, starting from residents' perceptions (García; Marinero, 2026). In the Turkish cities of the UNESCO learning cities network, squares, community gardens and ecological parks were analysed as environments for climate literacy (Fakıbaba Dedeoğlu, 2026). This grammar has the merit of bringing physical space to the centre of the concept. Public space ceases to be a setting and becomes learning infrastructure.

Cultural and rights-based grammar. The fourth grammar, with 12 works, reads the educating city as a guarantee of cultural rights and recognition. It includes heritage and memory (Gabriel; Vieira; Castral, 2022; Molina-Torres, 2022), the mapping of cultural practices as a basis for creative policies (Mesías-Lema *et al.*, 2024), arts education as a cultural right in Latin American cities (Pinto Sierra; Reyes-Ruiz, 2026) and the representation of the peripheral landscape in murals produced by public schools and graffiti artists (Imbrunito; Paula, 2026). It also includes the inclusion of historically excluded groups. Salcedo Serna and Peñaloza Tello (2024) defend the educating city as an ideological framework for policies aimed at people with

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disabilities, grounded in the recognition of difference rather than in solidarity with a group regarded as vulnerable, and Machado Bógus and Aires Magalhães (2022) show, for São Paulo, that policies for welcoming immigrants must permeate urban social relations and not remain confined to specific institutions. It is in this grammar that the most critical readings appear. Quinto (2021) recalls that the city can be miseducational when it serves anti-democratic logics, transmitting messages of exclusion through its very architecture, and Vieira and Silva (2023) discuss the right to the educating city in the context of the 2022 road blockades in Brazil, when public space was contested by anti-democratic demonstrations. Ortiz and Millan (2022), drawing on the *convites* of Medellín, propose a critical urban pedagogy situated in the everyday practices of producing space in self-built neighbourhoods, and Rocha, Cremaschi and Pereira de Lima (2026) show how university extension work in Buenos Aires and Recife combines Freire, decolonial thought and the right to the city.

4.3 Four tensions running through the grammars

The four grammars are not mutually exclusive, but neither do they add up without friction. A cross-reading of the corpus suggests four tensions that appear in more than one grammar and help explain why the concept, despite its spread, remains imprecise. For each tension, the forms it takes in different fields are set out below.

Education in the city or education through the city. The first tension takes up Trilla Bernet's (2015) triad. In the school-territorial grammar, it appears as the difference between using the city as an extension of the classroom, through visits, routes and after-school activities, and taking it as an object of knowledge, as in the walk through Corviale, where the periphery is both content and interlocutor (Alonso-Sanz; Braschi; Sebastianelli, 2023). In the civic-participatory grammar, the same tension separates participation as an event from participation as learning about the territory, which is a condition for intervening in decisions about it (Montebelli, 2023). In the socio-environmental grammar, it distinguishes public space used as a setting for educational activities from public space treated as an environment that teaches in its own right, as in the squares and gardens analysed as places of climate literacy (Fakıbaba Dedeoğlu, 2026). Finally, in the cultural grammar, the city appears either as a transmitter of messages that may be miseducating (Quinto, 2021) or as a surface rewritten by its own residents, as in the murals of the São Paulo periphery (Imbrunito; Paula, 2026). When the first dimension becomes exclusive, the city is schooled, and the question of what space teaches, through its forms and inequalities, goes unanswered. Critical pedagogy of place helps to frame this question by asking what kinds of places education helps to produce and leave to the next generations (Gruenewald, 2003).

Label or policy. The word label is used here as the authors' own critical term, not the AICE's. The association describes membership as an institutional process that includes approval by the competent municipal body, signature of the charter and payment of an annual fee; in São Gabriel, this approval took the form of a municipal law (Pastorio; Pastorio; Moll, 2021). The term serves to name the risk that membership may work as a brand without changing urban policy, as has already happened with other labels such as the sustainable city, the smart city and the creative city. The tension cuts across the grammars. In the civic-participatory grammar, it

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appears in membership read as an achievement of city diplomacy (Vera Hernández; Pacheco Carmona; Hernández-Pulgarín, 2025) and in legislation that names the relationship between city and education without saying how it would be carried out (Oliveira; Silva, 2025). In the school-territorial grammar, it appears in the lack of long-term political commitment and resources identified in the review by Alvarenga, Kuestra and Quaresma (2023). In the socio-environmental grammar, it takes the form of the gap between what experts recognise as a priority and what they consider feasible (Carretta Diniz; Londero Brandli; Gasparetto Rebelatto, 2026). In the cultural grammar, it appears in the different models for institutionalising arts education found in Medellín and Barranquilla (Pinto Sierra; Reyes-Ruiz, 2026). In every case, the question is the same: what changes in the territory after membership.

Consensus or conflict. The AICE charter speaks the language of consensus: coexistence, dialogue, shared responsibility, common values (AICE, 2020; Soares; Almeida, 2022). This language is understandable in a document signed by local governments of diverse political orientations, but it has a theoretical cost. The city is also a place of dispute over land, housing, the location of facilities and the right to decide. Lefebvre (2001) understood the right to the city as a right to transformed urban life, to centrality and to the collective oeuvre, and Harvey (2003, p. 939) added that it "is not merely a right of access to what already exists, but a right to change it". The tension appears differently in each grammar. In the school-territorial grammar, school segregation shows that the school inherits conflicts over income and housing that it cannot resolve alone (Aramendi Jáuregui; Rekalde-Rodríguez; Cruz Iglesias, 2022). In the civic-participatory grammar, the Children's Councils of Rosario were read in the light of Lefebvre and Arendt, as a dispute over the place of childhood in citizenship (Fernández Méndez, 2023). In the socio-environmental grammar, critical environmental education proposes to announce and denounce the causes of problems rather than merely promote behaviours (Figueiredo; Caporlingua, 2025). In the cultural grammar, the readings on the miseducating city (Quinto, 2021; Vieira; Silva, 2023) and the critical urban pedagogy of self-built neighbourhoods (Ortiz; Millan, 2022) take conflict as their starting point. Biesta's (2012) distinction helps to frame the problem: a pedagogy that teaches the public to behave according to given rules is not the same as a pedagogy that creates the conditions for people to become public by acting together.

Programme or space. The fourth tension is the one of most direct interest to urban planning. In most of the corpus, the educating city is a set of programmes, projects and events. Few works take urban materiality as their object: the distribution of schools and green areas, the quality of pavements, the safety of children's routes, the presence of squares where different groups meet. Yet it is through this materiality that the city teaches most lastingly. Tonucci and Rissotto (2001) showed that the degradation of the urban environment reduces children's play and independent mobility, with costs for their development. Studies on public green areas show that these spaces, when accessible and well maintained, serve functions of social interaction, leisure and environmental education (Benini; Martin, 2010), and that their unequal distribution and lack of maintenance affect peripheral neighbourhoods above all (Benini; Godoy, 2022). Here too the tension cuts across the grammars. In the school-territorial grammar, full-time education projects occupy squares, parks and rivers (Leite, 2012) but rarely transform them, whereas the school-based urban regeneration projects proposed for Mexico

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City take the transformation of the surroundings as content for civic and environmental education (De Marco, 2025). In the civic-participatory grammar, linking the educating city to the master plan shifts the discussion from the programme to the instrument that regulates space (Simon; Farah; Merlin, 2021; Zuin; Dias, 2023). In the socio-environmental grammar, green areas and public spaces come to be treated as learning infrastructure (Santos; Benini, 2024; Fakıbaba Dedeoğlu, 2026). In the cultural grammar, the mapping of cultural practices in A Coruña shows where provision is concentrated and where it is lacking (Mesías-Lema *et al.*, 2024). What remains is to follow this reasoning to its consequences: if space educates, urban policy must also be assessed by the educational effects of its choices.

4.4 Criteria for critical reading and operational definition

The tensions discussed do not call for abandoning the concept, but for establishing criteria capable of distinguishing its analytical use from a merely declaratory one. The starting point is principle 11 of the 2020 charter itself, which links the educating city to the planning of public space, accessibility, autonomy of movement and the needs of different groups (AICE, 2020). Drawing on the genealogy, the grammars and the tensions, six criteria are proposed that translate these commitments into verifiable questions. Chart 2 links each criterion to two levels of evidence. The first indicates formal intention, recorded in laws, plans and documents. The second makes it possible to examine implementation and its effects on the territory and on decisions. The distinction matters because the literature reviewed relies mainly on the first level, and a municipality can meet every formal requirement without anything changing at the second.

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Chart 2 – Criteria for the critical reading of educating cities and evidence of intention and implementation

Criterion	Guiding question	Evidence of formal intention	Evidence of implementation and effect
Intentionality (Faure *et al.*, 1972; Gadotti, 2006)	Is the educational function an explicit objective of urban policy, beyond the education department?	Membership law; City Educational Project; educating city guideline in the master plan	Actions included in the multi-year plan and the annual budget, with targets and people in charge
Transversality (Trilla; Ghanem, 2008; Leite, 2012)	Do sectors such as planning, environment, culture and transport make coordinated educational commitments?	Decree creating an intersectoral body; cooperation agreements between departments	Minutes of meetings with joint decisions; projects carried out with budgets from more than one department
Spatialization (Tonucci; Rissotto, 2001; Gruenewald, 2003; Benini; Martin, 2010)	Do the actions change or improve urban space, rather than merely occupy existing spaces?	Projects for squares, green areas, safe school routes and facilities in sectoral plans	Works completed and maintained; maps of walking access to facilities before and after the interventions
Deliberative participation (Freire, 1993; Fernández Méndez, 2023; Zuin; Dias, 2023)	Do residents, including children, influence decisions on space and resources?	Provision for councils, hearings and consultation with children in the rules of procedure or the plan	Traceable minutes and decisions that incorporate residents' proposals; public feedback on what was accepted or rejected
Socio-spatial justice (Harvey, 2003; Aramendi Jáuregui; Rekalde-Rodríguez; Cruz Iglesias, 2022)	Do learning opportunities reach first those who have least access to them?	Territorial priority criteria and targets for peripheral areas in the plans	Maps of access to facilities cross-referenced with income and social vulnerability data; territorial distribution of investment
Evaluated continuity (Kuestra Pereira; Alvarenga; Quaresma, 2026; Carretta Diniz; Londero Brandli; Gasparetto Rebelatto, 2026)	Are there indicators, public evaluation and continuity beyond a single term of office?	Indicator system established by law or plan	Periodic reports published; actions maintained after changes of government

Source: Prepared by the authors (2026), based on the review.

The criteria do not form an index to be added up, and none of them suffices on its own. Intentionality without spatialization produces charters of principles with no effect on the territory; spatialization without participation produces well-designed spaces for users who were not heard; participation without socio-spatial justice may amplify the voice of those who already have access to the city; and all these attributes are lost without continuity. The spatialization criterion is the one that most clearly sets apart the perspective proposed here. It asks, of any urban policy, what it teaches: a road system that gives priority to the car teaches that pedestrians are an obstacle, a fenced and distant park teaches that nature is a privilege, a school without a safe pavement teaches families that the street does not belong to children.

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An illustrative exercise shows how the criteria work together. Consider a municipality that belongs to the AICE and whose master plan includes the guideline “to promote the educating city” and provides for safe school routes. The guideline and the provision meet the intentionality criterion at the formal level. To move on to implementation, the first step is to spatialize: locate public schools using official school registers and trace, for each one, the area reachable in about fifteen minutes on foot along the street network, checking pavements, crossings, lighting and green areas along the routes. The second step is to examine socio-spatial justice by cross-referencing these areas with census income data and social vulnerability indices, to find out whether the improved routes are in the neighbourhoods that need them most or in those that already have good infrastructure. The third step is to check participation, looking in the minutes of the municipal council and in school consultations for whether children, families and teachers pointed out dangerous stretches and whether these indications appear in the works carried out. The fourth step is transversality: the routes depend at the same time on the education, public works, traffic and environment departments, and the existence of a shared project and budget can be verified. The last step is continuity, observed in the maintenance of the routes and in the publication of indicators after a change of government. The same procedure can start from another object, such as the distribution of squares and green areas or the location of cultural facilities. In any case, the exercise turns a written guideline into an analysis of where investment is located, who can reach the spaces and who influenced the decision.

Based on these criteria, the following operational definition is proposed: *an educating city is one in which government and society take on, intentionally, across sectors and over time, responsibility for the formative effects of urban space and of the policies that produce it, fairly distributing learning opportunities and the power to decide about the city, and recognising its inhabitants as subjects of this formation rather than merely as its recipients*. The definition preserves the Freirean reciprocity between the educating city and the educated city, incorporates the ambivalence pointed out by Trilla Bernet (2015), brings in the material dimension that the socio-environmental grammar began to explore and keeps the link with the right to the city.

Two implications for Brazilian urban planning follow from this reading. The first is that master plans and sectoral plans, such as those for mobility, green areas and facilities, can incorporate explicit educational guidelines, especially at the scale of the neighbourhood and the school surroundings, without the need to create new instruments. The democratic management provided for in the City Statute (Brasil, 2001) is itself a space for political learning, provided that participation has consequences for decisions. The second is that membership of the AICE can be assessed by the same criteria. A member municipality that neither changes the distribution of its public spaces nor expands residents' decision-making power has met the formal requirements for membership, but does not yet have an educating city policy.

5 CONCLUSION

This article examined the formation and recent uses of the concept of the educating city. The genealogy showed that the concept arose from the crisis of the school and the proposal

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of lifelong education, gained precision through the pedagogy of non-formal education, received from Freire a democratic and participatory inflection and became institutionalised through the AICE charter. The review of the 2021-2026 literature identified four grammars of use, which treat the educating city as a relationship between school and territory, as a way of governing, as a socio-environmental and climate strategy and as a guarantee of cultural rights and recognition. The cross-reading revealed four tensions that run through these grammars: between education in the city and education through the city, between label and policy, between consensus and conflict, and between programme and space.

The central argument is that the concept gains analytical depth only when it is read as a property of the production of urban space. Every city educates, but not every city takes responsibility for what it teaches. The six proposed criteria, namely intentionality, transversality, spatialization, deliberative participation, socio-spatial justice and evaluated continuity, seek to give shape to this responsibility and make it possible to assess municipal plans, programmes and memberships without reducing the educating city to a list of projects.

The study has limitations. The search focused on a metadata database that covers only documents with a DOI, which leaves out part of the output in books, theses and conference proceedings, and it examined the first 25 results for each descriptor, which may have left out relevant works further down the ranking. In addition, the analysis of the corpus was based on abstracts and metadata rather than on full reading of the texts, so the grammars and tensions should be taken as interpretive hypotheses still to be confirmed. The proposed criteria, in turn, still need to be tested in empirical studies, starting with exercises such as the one described in section 4.4. Three lines of inquiry seem promising: applying the criteria to Brazilian municipalities that belong to the AICE, comparing the discourse of membership with the territorial distribution of facilities and green areas; studying school routes and children's independent mobility as an indicator of the spatial dimension of the educating city; and analysing the incorporation of educational guidelines into master plans and climate action plans. In all of them, the underlying question is the one that guided this article: what does the city teach those who live in it, and who decides about it.

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DECLARATIONS

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- **Supervision**: Sandra Medina Benini and Ricardo Miranda dos Santos.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We, Sandra Medina Benini and Ricardo Miranda dos Santos, declare that the manuscript entitled “The city that educates: genealogy, contemporary grammars and tensions of the educating city concept”:

1. **Financial Ties**: has no financial ties that could influence the results or the interpretation of the work. No funding institution or body was involved in the development of this study.
2. **Professional Relationships**: has no professional relationships that could affect the analysis, interpretation or presentation of the results. No professional relationship relevant to the content of this manuscript has been established.
3. **Personal Conflicts**: has no personal conflicts of interest related to the content of the manuscript. No personal conflict related to the content has been identified.