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## “Researching Educational Reforms in Latin America. Inscriptions and Resignification”

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# “Researching Educational Reforms in Latin America. Inscriptions and Resignification”

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Both international and national research have emphasized that educational guidelines and recommendations issued by international agencies such as UNESCO, OECD, WB and IMF cannot be ignored by national policies.

The way in which these guidelines are inscribed in domestic educational policies has mainly been considered to be either a faithful copy –since it is taken to be just an external dictate- or a distortion of what had been mandated.

My claim is that none of these two approaches visualize other ways in which these recommendations are re-signified while being inscribed in national educational schemes and in so doing rich experiences are ignored and no one takes advantage of the potentiality of these re-significations.

Latin America, given its economic, social and cultural conditions, has been considered a geopolitical region upon which educational mandates proceeding from international agencies are imposed. In the following pages I will try to provide some examples of educational reforms in Latin America, namely Mexico and Argentina that in spite of having been a “translation” of World Bank guidelines were re-signified in the process of their implementation (Buenfil, 2000, Cruz, 2000).

I have organized this paper in three sections: firstly I will briefly contextualize the late eighties reforms in Argentina and Mexico; secondly I will suggest some forms to interpret these resignifications interweaving some conceptual indications as I gather they can be useful; and thirdly, I will present some points for discussion<sup>1</sup>.

### a) *Examples of educational reforms in two Latin American countries*

In the late 80s and early 90s of the XX century there were important domestic educational reforms both in Mexico and Argentina, the former called Educational Modernization in 1988 (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1992), and the later named Educational Transformation (Ministerio de Cultura y Educación de la Nación, 1993). Traces of the mandates issued by the World Bank (1990, 1995) and other international agencies can be found in both programs. In this paper I will only mention some aspects of them. For instance, both were openly considering challenges imposed by the globalizing process,<sup>2</sup> both installed strategies to

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on research conducted at the Departamento de Investigaciones Educativas del Centro de Investigación y Estudios Avanzados, del Instituto Politécnico Nacional in Mexico. An umbrella project on educational policies scrutinized in a qualitative approach under the perspective known as Discourse Theory and Political Analysis (Laclau and Mouffe) or Discursive political analysis (Buenfil) from 1996 to 2008. Within this wide-ranging project specific case research served for MSc degrees (López Ramírez, 1998, Cruz P, 2000, Castro 2003, Juárez, 2005 and a PhD thesis also by Juárez, 2009, *inter alia*) each one was based on field work, interviews, documental analysis, and gave place to specific dissertations and publications). Partial results have been already presented in different formats: graduate dissertations, in 2007 a Key note conference by Buenfil: *El Análisis político de discurso como perspectiva analítica para pensar las políticas públicas. La situación de América Latina for the Especialización para inspectores regionales Política y conducción educativa de la Universidad Pedagógica de la provincia de Buenos Aires*, Buenos Aires, June. In 2009, also by Buenfil a Lecture Jointly Sponsored by Latin American and Caribbean Studies and Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Wisconsin at Madison, Dec. 2009, among many others.

<sup>2</sup> Globalization has been widely discussed by scholars during the last decades of the XX century and still in the early XXI. Two extreme perspective still prevail: one that glorifies globalization and another that objects it because of its neoliberal orientation that would allegedly pervade the whole planet. The position I sustain (Buenfil 2000, 2006 and 2009) within this debate is that as interconnectedness globalization involves interpenetration of economic tendencies, contact of cultural diversity, intertwining of many traditions, interdependence of political trends; the production of syncretic and hybrid economic, cultural, educational and political outlooks and prospects. It does not occur without conflict since our planet has

reach some consent from the teacher's union in the Mexican case, and from provinces' authorities and civil society in the Argentinean case (consulta, pacto concertación); and the main points to be reformed were said to go from curriculum to incentives, from administration to teaching and learning methods, from syllabi to text books; from contents to expected skills, and so on. It is well known that these recommendations have better possibilities to penetrate national programs because the financial support that the World Bank (WB) provides is conditioned to the adoption of their proposals. However, knowing that it penetrates says little about the ways it does so. In terms of the context of their inscription as national policies, Argentina and Mexico show differences since they were not going through similar economic and political processes.

In Mexico Educational Modernization, issued in 1988, was as a part of a political reform <sup>3</sup>, a national developmental program associated with "social liberalism" (an euphemism for neoliberalism), and a salvation narrative <sup>4</sup> involving: a) subtle withdrawal of public services (education, health); b) a generalized and increasing call to "community partnership"; c) a national tendency towards "social liberalism" since the current government considered this would compensate their loss of credibility; and d) an increasing involvement of the Catholic Church in public education planning.

Of great importance is the influence of the teacher's union: the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (SNTE). This union was founded in the forties, as a result of a union-government compromise, and it recruits on a compulsory basis all the schoolteachers in service in the country, and its only opposition is from within: the so called democratic tendency (CNTE for its initials in Spanish) that emerged within the former though criticizing the authoritarian and corrupt tradition of the SNTE.

Argentina on its part, was living a process of political transition from the military regime (1976-83) to a democratic one. As an attempt to replace conservative

values, democracy achieved a nodal position in their discourse that constituted another salvation narrative to rescue the nation from economic crisis, a weak institutional system, intense pain in the population, and no doubt, a deteriorated educational system. The teacher's union Confederación de Trabajadores de la Educación de la República Argentina (CTERA) was founded in 1973 to defend teachers from the authoritarian regime, and recruits teachers in the whole nation.

In spite that both reforms involve programs concerning administration, syllabi, teaching methods amongst their main concerns, in this text I will draw only in the case of the schoolteacher aspects that involved teacher education, updating, and other issues attached to this question.

Both the Argentinean and the Mexican governments adopted the urgency expressed in international recommendations to form proficient schoolteachers: improve teacher formation both by means of demanding training schemes, seminars, lessons, classes, curricula, programs, and a whole system of wage compensations and punishments corresponding to their accomplishment in them, in other words, a curricular turn in their academic formation professionalizing their career.

In terms of the implementation of these policies a common feature was the short time the teachers had to become familiar with the new academic, administrative and employment regulations.

In terms of the signification constructed by schoolteachers around these policies, research has illustrated that cascades of complaints were collected that went from the lineage of the reform: "they are imposed by the WB", "our government just obeys the WB mandates", and so on; to its political incorrectness and its incompetent implementation.

My point here is that domestic impositions and distortions of the recommendations may take place as a result of the fusion of international guidelines into domestic reforms; however this is not the only thing that happens. In the very process of its inscription in domestic programs many re-significations take place that involve persuasion and adoption, resistance and simulation, opposition, contestation and reoccupation of the reform meaning, and many combinations of the former thus opening other political possibilities. These discursive movements allow our understanding of the hegemonic relations taking place as part of the political operations involved in the process under scrutiny.

These political and discursive possibilities are related to the conditions of appropriation each one has, which involve not just epistemological and pedagogical scaffoldings but also: a) a salvation narrative in the sense that the national program promises all sorts of strategies to save the country from the crises it was undergoing. And b) cultural traditions, employment

unequal development in each realm and geopolitical area. Tension, encounter, friction, clash and conflict are constitutive of globalization.

<sup>3</sup> A political reform that opened state-governments and municipal positions to representatives of political parties, while for the previous 70 years only one party (the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI) had been in government (democratically elected). This was unthinkable back in 1980. In the 1990s it became possible, for instance, finding a governor from the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) legitimately establishing educational orientations undoubtedly regressive in moral and intellectual terms. E.g. in Guanajuato, there was a PANista governor and authorized by the local representative of the Minister of Education, a "Guide for the Good Schoolteacher" was published recommending attitudes, clothing, rituals combining a strong authoritarianism (as for discipline) and puritan values (as for dressing, speech, teaching subjects etcetera). This is easily identifiable with a pre-revolutionary ethical imaginary (i.e. the so called 'Porfirista morals').

<sup>4</sup> Salvation narrative follows the Foucauldian logic implicit in the pastoral modality, a metaphorization of Christian dispositives.

conditions, and even moral and political preferences and prejudices. The working conditions of Argentinean and Mexican teachers presented some similarities such as low wages with the frequent consequence of schoolteachers having two and even three teaching jobs, poor social allowances, and poor social esteem. However they also have peculiarities. Firstly, the main difference between Mexico and Argentina is paradoxically also related with the very working conditions of teachers, since the former were invited and even summoned to adhere to the new regulations, norms, and updating system, while the Argentineans were warned that the lack of adherence to the reform would cause their job destitution. This sort of intimidation suffered by Argentineans (that the Mexicans did not undergo) plus the presence of each union sets different conditions for the integration and re-signification in each country. Secondly, a subtle cultural difference concerns that Argentinian teachers are mainly formed in universities while in Mexico they have been traditionally trained in Normal Schools (although the Pedagogical University started to instruct teachers in 1978). Thirdly, the unions although being national and massive, they show political differences in terms of their history and their relation with their respective Ministry of Education. Let me now present some examples drawn from research about these reforms.

1. An approach to the Mexican reform called Modernization focused on the way in which teacher's professionalization was differently signified according to the political and ideological orientation of those who have to put it into practice: authorities of the Ministry of Education, militant unionist teachers and teachers in service. The authorities tended to faithfully reproduce the meaning proposed by the reform text itself: a much needed reform to introduce Mexican education in the global competition with less disadvantages, and the much needed teacher updating and training system to raise their professional practice and thus their self-esteem. The militant unionists of the SNTE tended to boast a little, propose some subtle complementary remarks but mainly they did not subvert the meaning proffered by the reform documents. The unionist teachers belonging to the CNTE tended to intensely reject the reform, constructing it in a radically opposed way to the meaning indicated by the reform wording. Finally, the teachers in service, in spite of being members of the union, their position seemed quite indifferent from activist views, and some confessed not to be familiar with the reform as such; they opposed to it "because it was designed on the desk and not within educational reality"; however what they claimed to need from a reform was not really different from the pedagogical, epistemological and even labor approach formulated in the reform text (López Ramírez, J. 1998).
2. A research on the Mexican teacher professionalization pursued through two strategies: Carrera Magisterial (CM) and Programa de Actualización Permanente (PRONAP) focuses on the way in which teachers understand the latter. CM was structured around a set of seminars and classes whose addition would represent a labor promotion and wage increase, while PRONAP was organized to update on qualifications that teachers were supposed to have already, and did not conduce to better labor conditions. Research conducted along teachers illustrate firstly, the evident re-signification of the updating policy since teachers did not realize the differences of these two programs; secondly, That teaches did not identified themselves with this program since they argued it did not take into consideration their own formation trajectories, and because no labor benefits were at sight. The signifier "updating" (in Spanish actualización) is detached from the professionalizing meaning it had within the teacher educational policy and attached to a labor (wage and position) condition (Juárez, 2005).
3. A research comparing the Mexican and Argentinean reforms also illustrates the way in which these policies were differently signified by the designers and the users; however some similarities can be found between the Argentinian and the Mexican schoolteachers in spite of the diversity of their contextual conditions of implementation. Schoolteachers of both countries mentioned the need of a reform, however not with the form, content, strategies and norms of the ones implemented in each country. They also shared the view of a global imposition responding to World Bank mandates. There was a similar doubt as to the pedagogical novelty of the reform. Perhaps because both Argentinean and Mexican teachers had a difficult time to learn the methods indicated by the reforms, they preserved old practices and teaching methods, and they did not realize the substitution of teaching by objectives by teaching competences, or using the Vigotskian model instead of the structural one to teach language. This was not interpreted by the interviewed as a deliberate strategy, but as something that happens. Connected to the previous, they also shared the view of the inefficient implementation in terms of how the reforms were disseminated (too much to learn too soon). The differences turned around the positions they assumed before this new regulation: the Argentineans tended to provide narratives wherein frustration was explicit since although intellectually and politically dissenting, they showed nonetheless the tendency to comply the new rules.



In this aspect, the Mexican teachers that were interviewed produced narratives more conformist, less controversial, and a bit less compelled to follow faithfully the new mandate (Castro, M. 2003). Further research needs to be done in order to interpret what politically means this conformism and simulation, as well as the educational effects it will bring about in children.

This brief sample of research pieces (succinctly presented) illustrates different ways in which the meaning of educational reforms and policies mutates in the very process of its dissemination along the users, be it from the international mandate to the national policy, be it from the policy designers to the authorities and middle rank functionaries to the teachers, be it from the white unionist to the "dissident" unionist or apolitical teachers, be it from the teacher understanding of some of the specific schemas for their updating and professionalization, or be it from one country to the other.

Many questions arise at this point. Is it administratively useful to explain this alterations as a matter of misunderstandings that can be resolved with non-distorted communication? How many attempts are needed to turn and create a different approach? Is it politically convenient to try and retry imposition and obligation of policies which do not reach a context of appropriation convenient for the strong reduction of dissent, contestation and simulation? Is it pedagogically suitable to produce more teacher educational reforms that hardly ever manage to convoke the alleged beneficiaries? What type of research do we need in order to cope with these paradoxes? One answer to this has been that as policies are distorted in their dissemination there is no use in studying them, and an extreme approach would even claim that policies do not reach everyday school life.

Focused research, in situ studies and micro politics have provided insightful information of the way in which school life goes on. However, the divorce and tensions between particularity –as represented by these studies- and universality as pursued by policies is not confronted. Is it possible and academically feasible to bridge the gap between these two research traditions? Can this intricate web of meanings be rendered understandable in order to achieve both an educational and a political fertile intervention? Is this an adequate terrain to inquire about the teacher formation of dispositions and sensibilities? The weapons of critique need to be refined.

## II. IMPLICATIONS ON THE WAY ONE INTERPRETS THIS

As it was mentioned earlier in this article, educational reforms have been studied as public policies, as courses of action, as just a set of words that

have no effect on daily life in schools; and contrarily, as mere impositions of global neoliberalism producing a homogeneous planet. These opposed interpretations relying on a dichotomy and a disjunctive logic frequently miss a constitutive and thus important dimension of the process. Entangled in an "either/or" approach, the tension between opposed processes is missed and thus a rich field of epistemological and political possibilities. When studied as public policies, reforms are understood in terms of procedures (setting the agenda, choosing policy designers, and administrative rationality organizing implementation plans). Whatever is beyond the expected results is considered anomalous, distorting, or the result of sheer incompetence.

When reforms are understood as just a set of words that have no effect on daily life in schools, no interpretation can be given to both the productive and the sterile changes taking place in schools as a result of these policies, forcing interpretation to cultural, pedagogical or economic causes, either isolated or added in a sum. However, teachers who have been interviewed, claim their everyday life has changed because of these reforms bringing about new burdens.

When educational reforms are studied as mere impositions of global neo-liberalism producing a homogeneous planet, the result of research is predicted before the very act of researching, and indeed, commonsensical generalities are confirmed rather than new knowledge of the particularities of this relationship, its nuances and exceptions. A whole universe of specifications of the way in which these reforms are inscribed in the teachers practice is missed, questions about the formation of sensibilities and dispositions are barely posed, forms of contestation are infrequently observed, interstice tactics a rarely studied as such. The very frontier between what is included and what is excluded, and the process whereby this frontier is demarcated, are seldom scrutinized

In all those approaches the political dimension is basically ignored, either by focusing on imposition and exclusion, disregarding contestation, or by understanding politics just as imposition and missing its persuasive dimension; either by focusing on the administrative aspects of policy design or by enhancing only pedagogical aspects as the very essence of the reform; either by having communicational reason as the foundation and destiny of educational reforms (where all particularity is seen as distortion), or by understanding as separate spheres something that in its existence operates in an imbricate way.

My claim is that without ignoring the neoliberal aspects of these reforms, and without overlooking the distance between the meaning proposed by the reform documents and that constructed by the users, one can also acknowledge and focus on the reverse of this process, the dark side of the moon, the lesser movements that emerge in the interstice of social

regulation, and sometimes distort their meaning and even subvert it eventually. In my view, ignoring tension and interstice moves ends up being epistemologically poor and politically useless.

To deal intellectually with tension some methodological tools are needed concerning ontological and epistemological assumptions that I will not fully develop here but that I will at least mention. (Buenfil, 2000). The claim of an ontological position that is discursive, historical, and political, entails the understanding of social reality as constructed, and that one can have access to it as a signifying open ended, imperfect, temporarily stable system. This means that the existence of the "world-outside" (to use an expression dear to Analytical Philosophy) is taken for granted, however, its social meaning (i.e., its objectivity) is not derived from its mere existence, but socially constructed in time and space (i.e., in history). In addition, this contextually conditioned construction entails power relations in the sense that the instituting process of all social convention takes place through the inclusion of some features, norms, values, and practices, and the exclusion of others in a social, epistemological and political asymmetric condition of existence (i.e. historic and ontic). The claim of an epistemological position that is pragmatic, conversational and culturally mediated rejects the possibility of objectivity and truth beyond some discursive network (Rorty, 1989). Thus I am standing on a contextual, relationalist and post-foundationalist terrain (Critchley and Marchart 2004), that involves that all foundations, including "our universal values", are historically established, ergo, context-dependent.

This means that there is no a-temporal essence but all universal principles have once been particular values which came to reach some universality (and thus universality carries traces of particularity and political relations).<sup>5</sup> It has become more frequent to consider universals as the outcome of negotiations historically and geographically situated and no longer transcendental a priori (Laclau 1994).<sup>6</sup> This brings to the fore the constitutive character of the political. Thus, Reason with capital R, rather than being the foundation of universality (as Habermas would desire) is an intellectual nodal point that was universalized from the

Enlightenment onwards, leaving aside its counterpart: irrationality.

In order to understand and deal with tension as a fertile approach some logics such as imbrication, displacement and condensation (i.e., over determination), and aporia, seem to be convenient as intellectual images to figure out these relations. Imbrication suggests the idea of a systematic overlapping at the edges, and a resource for understanding that the universal and the particular cannot be thought of apart from each other.<sup>7</sup> Displacement evokes the circulation and mutual pervasion between significations from one symbolic site to another, thus inoculating its intensity in different nodes of a given socio/symbolic network. It represents the reverse side of condensation (the fusion of a multiplicity of intervening factors in one).<sup>8</sup> And aporia suggests an unsolvable tension between opposite forces, co-dependent forces that reciprocally undermine each other while being each other's condition of possibility, and differently from the Hegelian synthesis or the Aristotelian "middle disposition", this very lack of resolution is what produces multiple intellectual and strategic alternatives, since the terms of the tension undermine each other force but do not ultimately eliminate it.

Let us revisit the previous examples where the reforms for teacher education were re-signified in the very process of their implementation in schools.

- Before this reforms were issued, schoolteachers did not have to comply the rules and qualifications they had to after, so there is an undeniable link between the reform and the teacher everyday practice. For instance: teaching by competence, in knowledge areas instead of disciplinary fields, excluding behaviorism and embracing cognitive psycholinguistic; attending update and training classes assigned by the respective Ministry of Education, and so on. A different issue is whether these changes do correspond to those planned and indicated in the reform documents, or not.
- A mandatory dimension cannot be denied either; as we saw that teachers from both Argentina and Mexico signified and represented reform as a sort of obligation or inescapable mandate. However,

<sup>5</sup> The universal is colloquially understood as "something common to all particulars", but one seldom asks oneself how these universals came to be: are they derived from a metaphysical entity (God or Reason) or the outcome of social agreement?

<sup>6</sup> This should not be misunderstood as the abyss of relativism", as foundation lists call it. The lack of an ultimate-positive foundation of morals, science, the community, and so on, does not amount to say that "anything goes" (as Habermas, 1987, bitterly accused the postmodern thinking to be doing, such that the difference between repression and emancipation is blurred). I very much agree with the arguments posed by Bernstein (1983), Rorty (1982) *inter alia*, that relativism is a false problem posed by foundationlists.

<sup>7</sup> Several points call my attention here: universality and particularity are not separable, they are imbricate; the displacement of the signifier is poorly understood with images of determination and "necessary and sufficient causality", instead the logic of overdetermination provides inspiring descriptions (in the Rortyan sense); interpretations of mere imposition (e.g., UNESCO and World Bank impose their principle on national education reforms) are far from observing the multiplicity of processes taking place; the movements of the signifier "educational competence" along different geopolitical scales shows the political and discursive operations that -without excluding- go far beyond an economic, schooling or ideological unidirectional tendency.

<sup>8</sup> In Psychoanalysis these represent two processes operating in dreams.

imposition and obligation are only one side of the process, since on the one hand, some schoolteachers were convinced of the benefits involved in this policy, therefore, persuasion also operated in the reform addressees; and in addition, some teachers were not convinced at all and straightforwardly opposed to it, both through militant collective contestation and through personal dispositions and attitudes towards the reform.

Accordingly, in spite that globalization could have the goal to produce the gradual homogenization of the planet under a universal direction (if this were possible), no insightful inquiry can consider a thorough understanding of globalization as the mere loss of particularity; as research has shown: there is a tension between universality and particularity, and between similarities and differences. As we saw in previous lines global educational policies which are already an outcome of the contact between universalism and particularism, are re-signified when they reach particular sites of educational practices and agents (sites that are not merely physical topo but complex signifying/symbolic networks).

Once we understand this as a process that has also been constructed by means of a variety of meanings, we can handle these significations not as some being faithful and others being distorted, but as discursive constructs entangled with power relations amongst international agencies, national States, governmental institutions, local authorities, and singular schoolteachers. And these agents are inscribed in cultural, institutional and administrative traditions, and take part in political relations to convince and force other about the benefits or harms of some policy, to persuade and impose on the users some dispositions and sensibilities, include and exclude in a reform some principles, in other words, they take part in hegemonic relations: articulation and antagonism (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

### III. INTERWEAVING THREADS: POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

In the guise of conclusion (which is an oxymoron in a paper that claims for open ended discourse) I will attempt to interlace some descriptions, arguments and considerations. So far I have introduced some claims, I have presented some examples of educational reforms for teachers in Argentina and Mexico in the late 80s and early 90s, focusing on the diversity of re-significations taking place in their dissemination amongst assigned beneficiaries, and in the process of inscription of international mandates into these reforms. I then commented upon some usual approaches that focus on some aspects ignoring not just relevant data but constitutive processes involved in the dissemination and implementation of reforms. I

criticized them arguing that a whole universe of specifications of the way in which these policies are inscribed in the teachers practice is missed, questions about the formation of sensibilities and dispositions are barely posed, forms of contestation are infrequently observed, and interstice tactics a rarely studied as such. And I also suggested the exploration of different concepts and logics of inquiry that enable our understanding of these allegedly lesser processes (i.e., signifying movements, operations, and activities) and render visible epistemological, cultural and political dimensions of reforms in the everyday practice of teachers.

Methodologically speaking, educational research will benefit with the revision of its theoretical tools (i.e., concepts, logics and onto-epistemological positions), as well as the technical aspects of data collection (i.e., not just to gather what will confirm our initial theory) and their analysis; and in addition, reconsider the very questions we ask.

When dichotomy is the logic inspiring our approach we will probably end up with a flat all negative or all positive view of processes (i.e., an "either/or" approach). My contend is that educational research would benefit with logics that visualize unsolvable tension in the heart of social processes, since this may enable the search of political particularity connected with universality in both its senses of imposition and persuasion, inclusion and exclusion, domination and inducement, antagonism and articulation. It would also help to understand the way in which opposed values coexist, imbricate, get in tension and operate in our self; for instance how a schoolteacher who politically and pedagogically reject the reform can choose to comply it, simulate obeisance, cheat in their reports, oppose it openly, undermine it by interstitial tactics, ignore it and keep on teaching the way they know; and so on and so forth. These may be seen by some as minor aspects that do not produce a revolutionary change in education; however, these lesser and sometimes even isolated moves can create a sort of totalizing effect (Foucault) promoting different sensibilities and dispositions. Educational policies affect in different forms the school everyday life of students, teachers and clerks, ignoring the way this happens does not help to induce and conduce them to more effective and democratic paths.

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