

## “TEACHING SOCIAL SCIENCES AND DEMOCRACY”

The present article is part of the qualitative research work conducted together with the teachers of Social Sciences of the third cycle of General Basic Education (EGB 3)<sup>1</sup> from two state schools located in popular areas on the outskirts of Buenos Aires Province –Argentina-, between the years 2003 and 2005. The study focused on *the social representations that the teachers working in EGB 3 have about Social Sciences in their teaching practice*<sup>2</sup>.

Since 1983, the changes undergone toward democratic processes in our country were accompanied by an educational reform that, at the very beginning, showed signs of being based on a referendum<sup>3</sup>. The Federal Law of Education was sanctioned in 1993. As a result of interesting pedagogical approaches and economy-centered measures, we could see how education was spreading in its extent, but at the same time was losing quality.

The technocratic political and economic decisions made in Argentina in the last two decades have not aimed at human promotion and dignity through qualified job or production; consequently, neither was it required the profile of a student hoping to be promoted thanks to his

or her study and hence professionally qualified<sup>4</sup>. In this non-qualification, the de-democratization or the loss of the democratic exercise is implicit. Due to these changes, the teachers witnessed how students made less and less effort to acquire knowledge and realized that the educational policy reduced the timetable fixed for each subject, thus grouping geography, history and civic education into only one subject (Social sciences); therefore, the teachers were teaching contents of disciplines in which they had never been trained. Another measure was that teachers and professionals did courses to be qualified in the teaching of 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders attending that new level. These teachers were called “retrained.”

From the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Argentina, as well as it happened when all modern states were born, the political role of education was to support the growing State. The homogenizing cultural model was promoted. At that moment the *Code of Social Science Disciplines* appeared as an attempt to fulfill that homogenizing function. From 1947 to 1955, there emerged the State as a protector of the organized working class and of their social rights. However, the homogenizing process focusing on the historical myths and the great national heroes was still present in textbooks and school manuals<sup>5</sup>. After long periods of military governments from 1955 to 1983, there followed the neoliberal decade as from 1989, period in which the educational system was shaken by decentralization. If we consider that the ideas, the traditions, the routines and the values of a school discipline are condensed in a code, and that this code lets teachers get by in their daily teaching practice, we can say that the Code of Social Science Disciplines did not change too much until the neoliberal decade. Since it is an institutional

<sup>1</sup> For children aged between 12 and 14 years old. The schooling period covered was the one comprising 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> grades. EGB3 was the new cycle of the Argentine Educational System created as from the Federal Law of Education (Law No. 24195). The teachers' reaction against its creation and curricular consequences has led us to select teachers working at this level for our thesis. Since the sanction of the National Education Law, in December 2006, the mentioned cycle was replaced by the “Basic Secondary Education” or “ESB”. The level of EGB3 had already been modified by ESB in the Province of Buenos Aires in 2005.

<sup>2</sup> In our thesis work, Social representations are considered to be the conceptions and beliefs that society builds throughout the time, invade the language, and are influenced by ideology. They let the individual solve everyday situations without excessive reflection.

<sup>3</sup> We remember questions at meetings and debates all over the country to submit the reports on the conclusions, which ended in the Pedagogical Conference held in 1988. Refer to “Report on possible reforms of the educational system” (1987).

<sup>4</sup> Filmus, D.: *La educación latinoamericana, entre la transformación y el ajuste. En Políticas, instituciones y actores en educación*, Bs.As., Novedades Educativas, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Dobaño Fernández, Palmira; Lewcowicz, Mariana; Mussi, Román; Rodríguez, Martha: *Los libros de texto como objeto de estudio: un balance de la producción académica 1983-2000*. In “Los libros de texto como objeto de estudio”. Dobaño, P.- Rodríguez, M. (comp.) Buenos Aires, La Colmena, 2001.

and political product, it was influenced by the mentioned process. The teachers' social representations brought uncertainty and confusion to confront the paradox of the ideological discourse which generated as a result of the return to democracy and another market ideology that destroyed students' aspirations.

A "generalized structural crisis" became evident in teachers' representations<sup>6</sup>; that is, they reflected a context in which social, economic, cultural, political and educational deconstructions took place at both national and international levels. In this critical and paradoxical structure, the teachers built their practice "as well as they could", by taking elements -which De Alba calls "floating elements"- from previous and/or new structures.

Regarding the first level of research analysis, the teachers' representations showed a renewed approach where the following *values* were paramount: diversity acceptance, discussion of ideas, listening and dialogue, democracy, human rights, respect for diverse cultures and the environment, freedom of speech, group interaction, critical spirit, ethics and cases of public and private suffering arousing compassion and serving as an example of fight. They also expressed the importance of patriotism to foster encounter and dialogue in public places in search of a common destiny.

The second level of analysis focuses on the *processes of knowledge construction taking place in the teacher-student interaction*. The significance attached to capturing the students' interest, contextualization (a process through which the content acquires a psychological and socio-historical value) and personal opinions are highlighted in these teachers' representations.

The third level of analysis is the *ideological* one. The representations arising at this point can be categorized as follows:

- Being clearly explicit on the critical reflective stance in which the issue of the power in the hands of dominating economic elites is analyzed.
- Having a clear pluralistic view of ideas and aiming at encouraging everybody's opinions.
- Being afraid of the idea of discussing on "politics" or hegemonic power; in both cases the representations show certain "ideological neutrality."

Regarding the latter category of representations, it could be observed that teachers are "ideologically permeable"; that is, they are able to reflect on and find contradictions between the conceptions already taken for granted by society and their thoughts.

The "social and political organization" also appeared as a category and was included in the ideological focal point. Its analysis leads to the need of reflecting at schools on the organization of the country we wish, then analyzing the citizens' role.

We think that positivism as a stream of thought gives rise to the "apparent ideological neutrality" and is always present in teaching, but in the analyzed cases there appear some alternatives to its influence:

- With renewed values of social participation.
- With interwoven situational, contextual, social, and communication variables.
- With ideas based on pluralism and reflection.

We consider that the Educational Reform and the social and economic crisis have caused a rupture in the teachers' social representations. Some ways of presenting democratic values and teaching processes based on collaborative reflection and the ability to think over contradictions are fertile ground for building a new citizen's profile. They account for a gap to work on the concept of school as a democratic centre where the future citizen is encouraged in the dialogue and the freedom of thought. The resurgence of the value of "patriotism" would be, in this way, oriented to the search of encountering points where diversities might coexist.

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<sup>6</sup> De Alba, Alicia: *Crisis Estructural Generalizada en la formación docente, evaluaciones y nuevas prácticas en el debate educativo contemporáneo*. Publication of Conferences and Panels held at the 2nd International Congress of Education. Universidad Nacional del Litoral, 2004.

New spaces are required to let teachers work out their genuine demands and set a link between their representations and their practice, thus avoiding the apparent ideological neutrality. Teachers' training can emerge from this process of search of educational quality, together with public policies whose focal points are to be governability, development and equity.

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