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Child- centered pedagogies, curriculum reforms and neoliberalism. Many causes for concern, some reasons for hope

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Abstract: This article maps some of the ways in which neoliberalism, pedagogy, and curriculum are closely interconnected. Looking at the Spanish curriculum reform during the first Socialist administration in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it explicitly identifies child-centered pedagogies as an important tool in articulating the neoliberal agenda in curriculum reforms around the world. It explores the way Spain uncritically embraced these curriculum reforms with a notion of the individual not defined by the educational needs of the country but by the neoliberal rationality dominating Spain's political and economic transition at the time. Based on this analysis and on the way child-centered pedagogies have been implemented in education reforms around the world, this article considers the question of whether such pedagogies can really work toward the democratic ideals they claim to serve. The article concludes by offering some reflections on this question and by calling for a larger and interdisciplinary conversation on the ideological possibilities of these pedagogies.

Key words: constructivism, curriculum reform, child- centered pedagogies, neoliberalism, governmentality, Spain

The connections between neoliberalism and education have been extensively documented by now (Apple, 2001; Cascante, 1995, 1997; Gentili, 1997; Lipman, 2011; Silva, 1998; Varela, 2007; Watkins, 2011). Understanding the impact of these connections on teachers' practices and curriculum, ho-

wever, has been a much more elusive task. Terms such as privatization, accountability, choice and value-added, all testimonies to the strong neoliberal roots of current educational policies, now plague our education vocabulary. Yet, beyond the well known and perverse effects of some of these policies, such as standardization or teaching to the test, we know very little about how neoliberalism has affected teaching and curriculum. Indeed, when looking at schools around the world it may seem as the larger political and economic forces embedded in phenomena such as neoliberalism and globalization have not altered these areas at all. As Carnoy and Rhoten (2002) state, “education appears to have changed little at the classroom level in most countries—even in those nations most involved in the global economy and the information age” (p. 2).

This article argues that, despite this apparent stasis, the last decades have uncovered new and very important connections between neoliberalism, pedagogy and curriculum. It makes this argument by looking at the Spanish curriculum reform during the first Socialist administration in the late 1980s and early 1990s and by outlining the role of child-centered pedagogies in articulating the neoliberal agenda in education. It specifically contend that the uncritical adoption of these pedagogies informed the new curriculum with a notion of the individual than responded more to the neoliberal rationality dominating Spain’s economic and political transition at the time than to the country’s educational needs. Drawing a parallel between the role of child-centered pedagogies in the Spanish curriculum reform and in current educational reforms around the world, this article raises the question of whether such pedagogies can really work toward the democratic principles they claim to serve. To conclude, the article offers some reflections on this question and calls for an interdisciplinary conversation on the ideological possibilities of child-centered pedagogies in educational practices.

Curriculum Reform and Neoliberalism in Spain in 1980s and 1990s

Eager to leave behind forty years of dictatorship, in 1982 Spain elected a socialist government and charged this administration with the task of constructing a new democratic and European identity for the country. Understanding that education was a crucial component of democracy, the first socialist administration immediately introduced major changes in what was clearly an obsolete and autocratic educational system. In the case of compulsory education, these changes culminated in 1990 when, after a few years of national education debates and a phase of pedagogical experimentation, the parliament approved the *Reform Law of Compulsory Education* (LOGSE).

This law pursued three main goals: 1) to increase of the age of free and compulsory education from 14 to 16 years; 2) to restructure the education system into three different levels (early childhood, elementary, and secondary); and 3) to ‘modernize’ vocational education (Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia, 1995). An overarching and more ambitious goal, however, related to improving teaching practices and the quality and nature of the school curriculum (Martínez Bonafé, 2001). The innovative educational movements of the 1970s (led mostly by the Movements for Pedagogical Renewal—Movimientos de Renovación Pedagógica) had energized a large section of teachers to contest anti-authoritarian practices in school and to experiment with progressive pedagogies. The yearning for changes expressed by these teachers, along with the general hope for social transformation embedded in this moment of political transition, provided a strong support for the first socialist administration’s vision of education as an engine for democracy. To educate new democratic citizens, though, the schools inherited from Franco needed to profoundly change the way they understood teaching and learning as well as the goals of education in a democratic society. The socialist administration focused on the areas of curriculum and professional development to accomplish this goal (Martínez Bonafé, 2001).

Trying to avoid the top-down policies that had characterized schools during the dictatorship, the first socialist administration conceptualized the education reform as a participatory process to be developed in two phases. The first one, roughly 1983 to 1986, was meant to be experimental and teacher-led. Schools interested in participating in this process were invited to design their own school curriculum and teaching materials. The administration tried to aid this process by creating the Centers for Teacher Training (Centros de Educación del Profesorado) in 1984. These centers worked as local spaces to design and conduct the professional development needed to accomplish schools’ pedagogical projects. The second phase, roughly 1986-1989, was initially conceived as a time to assemble the materials developed in the experimental stage, to discuss them and to elaborate a final national curriculum proposal to be later endorsed by the official reform law. In this second phase, the administration, now the second socialist administration, submitted to a national debate several of the documents elaborated by the Ministry of Education. The most important of these documents were the *White Book for Educational Reform* and the *Basic Curriculum Design*, both released in 1989. The former was the draft articulating the final proposal for the educational reform law (LOGSE). The latter was the official framework for the curriculum to be implemented in this law.

While the original intention of proceeding with the education reform in two phases was to assure conceptual continuity, in terms of the curriculum, the second phase signified more a departure than a continuation of the first one. As many authors have argued and lamented, the curriculum proposal embraced by the Ministry of Education in the *Basic Curriculum Design* in 1989 significantly deviated from the pedagogical tradition that had mobilized so many educators in the early 1980s (Gimeno Sacristán, 1995; Plataforma Asturiana de Educación Crítica, 1998; Rodríguez, 2001; Varela, 1991; 2007). This proposal, the authors explain, was not the outcome of the innovative experiences developed by the schools involved in the experimental reform. Rather, in their view, this document embraced a technocratic perspective that disregarded the knowledge accumulated during this phase. These authors illustrate how while still keeping the rhetoric of change, the proposal adopted by the Ministry of Education in the *Basic Curriculum Design* was initially developed by a group of educational psychologists in Catalonia. The leading figure of this group was Cesar Coll, a renowned educational psychologist whose works would become particularly relevant and who would be eventually known as “the father of the curriculum reform” (Varela, 2007). This proposal, the critics claim, did not involve the participation of teachers or other educational constituencies. Far from it, the official proposal now adopted by national administration was designed to appeal almost exclusively to the expertise of educational psychology and required teachers to become familiar with the language and propositions of this field. Moreno Olmedilla (1998) explains how one of the consequences of this “political embracement of cognitive psychology” was the conceptual grounding of the curriculum on works developed, almost exclusively, by educational psychologists. A poignant example in this regard was Cesar Coll’s 1991 book *Psychology and Curriculum* (*Psicología y Currículum*), the text that became the most important theoretical referent in the official stage of the curriculum reform.

For many of the educators working on leading roles in the first stage of the reform, the official endorsement of a psychologized curriculum clearly signified a rejection of the participatory elements of this phase and a shift toward more conservative positions (Cascante, 1995, 1997; Plataforma Asturiana de Educación Crítica, 1998; Varela 1991, 2007). Even when the administration continued a rhetoric of change and innovation, the new curriculum proposal was viewed by these authors as a top-down and technocratic process with little input from teachers. In his reflections on the process of curriculum reform in the 1980s, for example, Jurjo Torres, one of the education advisors in the first two socialist administrations, lamented how the reliance on the expertise of educational psychology contribu-

ted to the de-professionalization of teachers and explained how professional development became almost exclusively an exercise of familiarizing teachers with the new psychological jargon of the reform (Varela, 2007). Martínez Bonafé (2001) further argues that the adoption of this particular curriculum proposal worked as a discursive device used to dismiss other possible curriculum alternatives interested in larger social questions such as the role of schooling in addressing the challenges of the country at the time. For Martínez Bonafé (2001), the power of this proposal was particularly problematic for its ability to erase the historical memory of those practices that had framed the “social commitment” (*compromiso social*) of teachers during the political transition. In Martínez Bonafé’s account, the alternative movement to traditional education in Spain in the decade prior to the education reform followed pedagogical traditions that envisioned schools as a part of a larger social movement toward the democratization of the country. Sacristán (1995) identifies some of these pedagogical practices when explaining the theoretical approaches that led the experimental phase of the reform:

From the pedagogic point of view, the educational model which now won official blessing brought together the principles of progressive pedagogy from Europe and America, of activist pedagogy and, more specifically, the popular school of Freinet, the Italian cooperative movements; it borrowed Dewey’s approach to learning, the anti-authoritarianism of 1968 French pedagogy, ingredients of Romantic pedagogy which favored new humanist relations in teaching, of Piagetianism, aspirations to interdisciplinary and complementarity in intellectual formation, and a certain militancy against hegemonic textbooks. It stressed the importance of media, a formative model for student assessment, introduction of new technologies, excursions into the outside world to study social, geographical and cultural realities, and generally making use of the environment, establishing connections between intellectual and physical development, stimulating the participation of students, flexible grouping of students and the take-up of action research. (p.119) [*the translation is mine*]

In stark contrast to the social grounds of these pedagogical traditions, Martínez Bonafé (2001) argues, the second phase of the reform sought to erase the pedagogical and conceptual richness that educators experienced in the initial reform phase and invited teachers to ground their teaching

practices on knowledge generated outside of the discipline of education. As the title of the article illustrates, Varela (1991) conceptualized this pedagogical shift and the predominance of psychology in the official curriculum as the “triumph of the psychological pedagogies.” The following excerpt from Coll (1995) explaining the foundations of the official curriculum reform illustrates the nature of this shift. In the words of Coll, the proposal, which he and his colleagues had developed in the 1989 *Basic Curriculum Design*, was officially endorsed by education reform law:

...reflects a constructivist conception of the pedagogical intervention which intends to impinge on the constructive mental activity of the student creating the favorable conditions for the meaning constructed by him/her to be as rich and as adjusted as possible. In a constructivist perspective, the ultimate goal of the pedagogical intervention is to develop the capability in the student her or himself of making meaningful apprenticeships within a range of situations and circumstances (learn to learn). (Coll, 1995, p. 133) [*the translation is mine*]

Explicit in this quotation, and contrary to the pedagogical propositions of the first stage of the reform, is an understanding of learning as an individual act guided by the principles of psychology and of cognitive psychology to be more precise. More importantly for this analysis, this quotation also makes explicit reference to constructivism, the main novelty in this new curriculum proposal according to Coll (1991; 1995) and a crucial notion for understanding the outcomes of the curriculum reform in Spain (Rodríguez, 2001). Conceptually, this term was not completely foreign to many educators. The pedagogical foundations of the experimental reform reflected in the statement by Gimeno Sacristán echoes some of the child-centered pedagogies that are commonly identified as a part of the constructivist approach. The constructivist perspective endorsed in the official proposal retained the anti-authoritarian rhetoric of these pedagogies and their appeal to educate citizens able to think on their own. While still promoting this language, nonetheless, this proposal also opted for a definition of constructivism in which learning occurred within the individual and outside of any social context (Walkerdine, 1984; Windschitl, 2002). Furthermore, the official proposal made this notion of constructivism normative and expected schools to use it as the foundation for their pedagogical programs. It is important to note that, once the reform was implemented, schools were also evaluated in relation to the consistency of their programs with this constructivist framework. Referring to the sudden discursive and material power of this

notion and the unrealistic expectations it triggered, Martínez Bonafé (2001) explains how this term came to be understood as the magical key that could open the doors for all the desired curriculum changes.

For those authors already critical of the socialist administration for abandoning the search for an open curriculum and for adopting a proposal with very normative foundations, the emphasis on the individual brought forward in this proposal clearly signified the consolidation of neoliberal policies in education (Cascante, 1995; 1997, Plataforma Asturiana de Educación Crítica, 1998; Varela, 1991; 2007). For them, this curriculum shift depoliticized the conversation on education and took agency away from teachers. Adding another layer of analysis to this curriculum shift, the next section of this article argues that the emphasis on the individual emphasized by the constructivist perspective and adopted in the official curriculum proposal did not occur as a “consequence” of neoliberal economic policies. Rather, this section argues that the specific notion of constructivism endorsed by this proposal was a very active element “articulating” these neoliberal policies in education.

Neoliberalism as a Political Rationality

Spain in the 1980s, the decade that witnessed the transition between the experimental and the official stages of the curriculum reform, was deeply shaped by the process of Spain’s integration into the European Community formally in 1986 and the neoliberal economic reforms that followed. The democratic hopes placed in the socialist administration elected early in this decade have been informed by the political struggle to create an ideologically plural country but, also, by the desire to share the levels of security and material comfort that other European nations had enjoyed for many years as a part of their welfare state system. By the time Spain joined what is now the European Union and was required to start implementing the political and economic guidelines of this organization, though, the hopes for a welfare state had been substantially diminished. This social model was now in crisis and it was struggling for its own survival in many countries (Holman, 1996). Additionally, the European Community was preparing to sign an important monetary agreement that involved, among other things, the new Euro-based currency that is now in place. Formal integration into Europe, therefore, required many radical changes in the economies of all participating countries in order to maintain a low level of inflation.

With the weakening of the welfare state and the need to create a dynamic economy, the consequence of this political juncture was the implementation of neoliberal policies that advanced a structural reform through

the liberalization of the market that created more part-time and temporary jobs, increased labor market flexibility, and privatized major state-owned companies (McVeigh, 2005). Many people within the socialist party, now moving toward more conservative positions, supported these policies (Holman, 1996). Indeed, political analysts like McVeigh (2005) argue that the socialist administration used the process of European integration as a justification of neoliberal policies that weren't strictly necessary for the economic improvement of the country. Nevertheless, these policies became very difficult for a country seeking to establish a state with higher standards for social welfare and resulted in destructive tensions between the socialist government and other social forces in the country such as the labor unions. By the end of 1980, for example, the unions demanded a higher share of the economic benefits of the decade that they felt they had contributed to politically by signing the social pact (known as *Pactos de la Moncloa*) during the political transition. The second socialist administration (1986-1990), however, demurred such claims on the basis of an unattainable welfare state. These tensions evolved into important social conflicts such as the teachers' strike and the first general strike in 1988 (Holman, 1996). The economic prospects did not improve when entering the new decade. With the Maastricht treaty of 1991 and the global economic crisis affecting Europe in the early 1990s, Spain experienced a massive recession at the beginning of the decade. Despite the neoliberal policies adopted, unemployment rose to 24% by 1993 (Doz Orrit, 1995). The socialist administration responded to this crisis by implementing even more severe neoliberal economic policies to further flexibilize the market in the hopes of attracting foreign capital to the country (Holman, 1996).

What is particularly interesting for this analysis is that the political energy and appetite for social reforms that took the socialist party to power in 1982 did not materialize in an alternative, or even a serious resistance movement, to the neoliberal policies of the late 1980s that eroded the possibility of a strong welfare program. Despite all the social conflicts of the moment, the transition to a neoliberal economy was presented as unavoidable and occurred undisrupted by the social forces that had formerly unified the post-dictatorship nation. Indeed, there was a growing underlying assumption that any apology of the welfare state was an irresponsible act that could threaten the Spanish economy by turning away possible economic investment and that people's well-being no longer depended on the state but on the market. Felipe González, the Prime Minister at the time, was eager to remind the country that all these policies were for the "good of the country" and their consequences were still better than the alternative, namely, exporting Spanish labor because of the lack of foreign investment in the country (Wigg, 1988).

Foucauldian scholars help us to understand the rapid endorsement of neoliberalism in the country and the absence of political alternatives to it by reminding us that what Spain was adopting was not just a new political doctrine but, rather, a much more subtle and pervading political rationality that changed the way people thought about government and about the relationship between governments and individuals (Foucault, 1991; Gordon, 1991; Burchell, 1993; Rose, 1992, 1998; Barry, Osborne, & Rose, 1996). For these scholars, neoliberalism, as well as its classic version, liberalism, constitutes neither a particular political theory nor a method of government. Rather, these scholars suggest that what defines neoliberalism is a particular way of thinking about the nature of governmental practices, a way of identifying who governs, who is governed, and what governing means (Gordon, 1991). In these scholars' account, it is this political rationality, and not just the economic or political forms of government associated with neoliberalism, that upholds changes in government since it generates forms and practices of government that appeal both to those who are the practitioners of government and those who are governed. For these scholars, the political rationality that articulates both liberalism and neoliberalism no longer understands the act of governing as an imposition on the "governed" of those practices or ideologies intended by government. On the contrary, in their view this rationality of government is constructed as a complex interplay of different social and political practices always involving the active participation of those who are being governed.

Foucault (1991) termed this political rationality *governmentality* and explained it as a departure from prior practices of government based on the authority of those governing. Far from this unidirectional downward understanding of government, governmentality, as Gordon (1991) has further explained, is

a way or system of thinking about the nature of the practice of government (who can govern; what governing is; what or who is governed), capable of making some form of that activity thinkable and practicable both to its practitioners and to those upon whom it was practiced. (p. 3)

To the extent that government involves power, this new system of thinking requires the complex interplay of two different technologies of government: *technologies of power* and *technologies of the self* (Foucault, 1988). The former submits individuals to certain forms of domination. Because power, in governmentality, is only power if it elicits the response of individuals to act freely and to be agents of power themselves, this rationality requires

of the technologies of the self, a notion understood as the process of subjectification through which individuals transform themselves in the pursuit of certain practices of government. Foucauldian scholars such as Burchell (1993) emphasize the importance of techniques of the self in both liberalism and neoliberalism by conceptualizing their articulation as the construction of a “relationship between government and governed which increasingly depends upon ways in which individuals are required to assume the status of being the subject of their lives, upon the ways in which they fashion themselves as certain kinds of subjects, upon the ways they practice their freedom” (p. 276). Rose (1999) further highlights individual agency in what he terms “advanced liberal” societies by stating that “when it comes to governing human beings, to govern is to presuppose the freedom of the governed. To govern humans is not to crush their capacity to act, but to acknowledge it and to utilize it for one’s objectives” (p. 4).

But, according to Foucauldian scholars, rationality, in both liberalism and neoliberalism, is always defined in relation to the market. In liberalism, the rationality for government comes from respecting the quasi-natural entity called the market that needs no governmental interference for its growth. Hence, the individual participates in this growth by taking private initiative that would nurture his/her growth. In liberal societies, for example, the individual is supposed to invest his or her earned money in the market so business can flourish and the market can grow. Likewise, the individual is expected to protect the natural flow of the market by supporting those political positions that constrain governmental intervention in private business. In neoliberalism, however, this rationality takes an interesting turn and the market itself becomes the rationality for government. Neoliberalism does not treat the market as an independent entity. On the contrary, it understands it as an entity that needs to be provided with necessary conditions for its growth. In Burchell’s (1993) words:

[Neoliberalism]...becomes a question of constructing the legal, institutional, and cultural conditions which will enable an artificial competitive game of entrepreneurial conduct to be played to best effect...Government must work **for** the game of the market competition **as** a kind of enterprise itself [emphasis on the original]. (p. 275)

Implicit in this quotation is a new role for the state. Under the neoliberal rationality, the market as an entity “exists and can only exist, under certain political, legal and institutional conditions that must be actively constructed by government” (Burchell, 1993, p. 271). Chief among these conditions,

some Foucauldian scholars argue (Rose, 1992, 1998), is the establishment of an enterprising culture in which government, individuals, and organizations function *as* the market. To guarantee that the competitive and entrepreneurial game of the market is played to its optimum effect, neoliberalism proposes that all forms of conduct work with the same entrepreneurial rationality of the market. Such rationality not only includes the individual, but it makes him or her a fundamental pillar of this rationality. Individuals are called to believe that the role of the state is to nurture the market and to create the necessary conditions for its growth. More importantly, in this rationality individuals are also expected to benefit from the market by taking responsibility for themselves, by assuming their life as a personal project for themselves and by becoming enterprising selves. In Rose's (1992) words,

the subjective being, it is to aspire to autonomy, it is to strive for personal fulfillment in its earthly life, it is to interpret its reality and destiny as matters of individual responsibility, it is to find meaning in existence by shaping its life through acts of choice.
(p. 142)

This brief examination into the notion of political rationality in neoliberal societies and the notion of the enterprising self embedded in it allows us to view the new role of the state in Spain in the 1980s as a part of a neoliberal rationality. The second socialist administration's shift from wishing to provide a strong welfare state to providing the conditions for a flexible market that would secure the well-being of the country can now be explained as a part of the neoliberal political rationality that understands the active fostering of the growth of the market as one of the many practices of government. Likewise, the appeal to Spaniards to accept the impossibility of the welfare state and to take upon themselves the self-responsibility of participating in and benefiting from this new flexible market, can now be understood as an appeal for individuals to act as enterprising selves. Indeed, it can be argued that the lack of resistance to the mass unemployment experienced in the early 1990s can be attributed to the establishment of an enterprising culture in the country that exonerated the government from directly improving the living conditions of people and that expected individuals to engage in the constant pursuit of their own benefits. As Gordon (1991)'s explains when referring to new governmental practices in current neoliberal societies:

It would seem that a part of the unexpected political acceptability of renewal mass unemployment can be plausibly attributed to the wide diffusion of the notion of the individual as enterpri-

se. The idea of one's life as the enterprise of oneself implies that there is a sense in which one remains always continuously employed in (at least) that one enterprise, and that it is a part of the continuous business of living to make adequate provision for the preservation, reproduction and reconstruction of one's human capital. (p. 44)

This analysis of the nature of the political and economic changes in Spain in the late 1980s suggests that one of the main novelties in the practice of government at this time was the appeal for individuals to self-govern, to conduct themselves as enterprising selves. Simon and Masschelein (2006) refer to the importance of this appeal when explaining how, "[w]ithin neoliberal governmentality people are not addressed (any more) as social citizens...but as entrepreneurial selves and entrepreneurs of the self" (p. 419). This call for self-government was not confined to the realm of the economy. Indeed, as illustrated in the next section, this call appears to have been at the core of the curriculum proposal adopted by the second socialist administration.

Neoliberalism and Curriculum

Looking back at the constructivist foundations of the official curriculum proposal described by Coll (1995) above, the shift from socially contextualized pedagogies to psychological perspectives on learning and teaching seem far from just an innocent or a casual choice. As stated in this quotation, the constructivist notion endorsed in this proposal identifies the individual student as the main site of learning and expects students to take ownership for the act of learning. It also expects students' pursuit of their own benefit by capitalizing on the situations presented to them and by, as stated by Coll, "learn to learn" (p. 133). Reading this quotation now through the lenses of neoliberalism as a political rationality, the similarities between the notion of the learner promoted in this constructivist perspective and the notion of enterprising self at the basis of this rationality are difficult to overlook. Indeed, from this perspective it could be argued that constructivism was very successful in redefining the learner as an enterprising self, as an individual always capable of regulating and conducting his/her own learning.

Understanding neoliberalism as a political rationality also allows for a contestation of the ideological neutrality of psychology and to expose its role as a technology of government. Rose (1999) explains that, in what he terms advanced liberal societies, governing assumes, and needs, the exercise of freedom of those governed. It is only through these acts of freedom and self-regulation, he argues, that practices of government are possible in

these regimes. This reliance on an autonomous being willing to engage in government through acts of choice, however, requires new technologies of the self able to regulate individuals' conduct in the private sphere according to neoliberal practices of government. Rose (1992; 1998) argues that psychology has become one of these technologies. Invested with the expertise of science and objectivity, Rose explains that psychology has come to be seen as a new authority in the conduct of individuals and, consequently, in the way people understand themselves in relation to the government. Perhaps the most convincing evidence of this argument, Rose suggests, is the dramatic increase in the number of books in the "self-help" section of any library in the last two decades and the way in which we have developed new ways of understanding ourselves based on this literature.

While Rose (1992; 1998) develops this argument in the field of therapeutics, the strong psychological grounds of the official curriculum proposal in Spain evidences the discursive power of psychology in education. As mentioned above, this discipline advanced a notion of the learner that articulated the main tenants of the neoliberal rationality. Indeed, the discursive power of this notion was so strong that those educators who have to implement the education reform offered virtually no resistance when this conception of the learner was presented as the only possible curricular option. For learning to occur, psychology and its educational experts ruled, the learner had to permanently remain engaged in the act of learning and to regulate him/herself toward this goal. Tuschling and Engemann (2006) add to this understanding of the discursive power of this definition of the learner by highlighting the emphasis that neoliberal regimes place on the notion of lifelong learning. According to these authors, neoliberal regimes reject the learner as a passive receiver of information and identify the learner as an active element in the process of learning. Needless to say, this was a hard proposition to dispute by teachers in Spain when pursuing the task of educating more autonomous and democratic citizens. But, as also explained by these authors, the emphasis on lifelong learning also shifts the gravity of power in education from the curriculum to the individual. In their words, in education "the center of attention is no longer the curriculum that students have to master, but their abilities to organize themselves and to perceive and use their circumstances as learning opportunities" (p. 458). As implied in the analysis presented above, the official curriculum proposal adopted by the national education administration in Spain in the late 1980s presented psychology as a particularly useful tool to accomplish this shift.

It is important to clarify at this point that the analysis presented above does not identify constructivism as an intrinsically neoliberal tool. Based on this analysis, however, it would be fair to say that the psychological version

of constructivism endorsed by the Spanish curriculum became an ideological tool for the conservative agenda of neoliberalism and worked toward the dismantling of the progressive pedagogies in place in the early 1980s. A quick look at the role that constructivist methodologies have played in other education reforms around the world further substantiates this claim.

According to Silva (1998), the psychological pedagogies that served to articulate the neoliberal agenda in Spain are also responsible for the neoliberalization of the curriculum in many countries in South America in the 1990s. Silva explains that, just as it happened in Spain in the 1980s, many of these countries were facing the challenge of leaving authoritarian regimes behind and charged their educational system with the task of educating a more democratic citizenry. Unfortunately, he critically assesses, the educational administration in these countries responded to this challenge by adopting the same curriculum proposal that was developed by Cesar Coll and his colleagues in Spain. In his view, the overwhelming reliance on what he refers to as “pedagogies psy” also worked to promote a neoliberal agenda in these countries.

The appeal for constructivist methodologies has also been an important aspect of education reforms in countries transitioning to democratic systems in other parts of the world (Dominguez de Montoya, 2008; Tabulawa, 2003; Woo & Simmons, 2008). These reforms call for placing the student at the center of teaching and for educating citizens able to navigate, and even thrive, in the neoliberal regimes adopted by these countries. Usually presented in contradiction to the teacher-expert approaches that symbolize the authoritarian power of non-democratic regimes, student-centered pedagogies that call for active learning and critical thinking are constructed as the normative way to educate a more engaged and independent learner able to respond to the new demands of democratic regimes (Amsler, 2009). Tabulawa (2003), for example, explains that learner-centered pedagogies are “[o]ften singled out... as the nexus between education and the broader principle of democracy” (p. 8) and that these pedagogies have been the blueprint of the governmental agencies involved in policy and economic development in non-Western countries. Woo and Simmons (2008) further explain that the creation of child-centered teaching and learning strategies was the basis of the New National Curriculum Framework adopted by the Afghanistan Ministry of Education in 2002.

While all these reforms presuppose the inherently democratic nature of constructivism, critics of these reforms have also exposed the ideological role of these methodologies. Tabulawa (2003), for example, argues that child-centered pedagogies in Botswana became a Westernizing tool by promoting liberal democracy, the particular version of democracy predominant in what he calls the “core” zone of industrial nations (US, Western Europe, and

Japan). Tabulawa argues that the education aid agencies operating from this core zone and working on educational changes in what he refers to as periphery states, those states outside of the core zone, have chosen child-centered practices as their official pedagogy not because of their educational merits but because of their ideological intentions. In his view, these practices, usually presented as an ideologically neutral one-size-fits-all pedagogy, were selected to promote democracy in countries perceived as driven by authoritarian regimes. In tune with the analysis of the Spanish curriculum reform presented in this article, his study of the USAID programs in Botswana in the 1980s in the areas of pre-service and in-service training lead him to conclude that child-centered pedagogies were an indispensable tool for the neoliberal policies that promoted liberal democracy in the country. He further illustrates this argument when stating,

neo-liberalism became enshrined in the policies of bilateral and multi-lateral aid agencies, displacing modernisation theory. In so far as Third World development was concerned neo-liberalism surmised that economic development was only possible where there was liberal democracy. Education, as a change agent, had an indispensable role to play in the democratisation process in those countries. To achieve this, aid agencies identified the learner-centred pedagogy (because of its democratic tendencies) as the appropriate pedagogy in the development and dissemination of democratic social relations in Third World schools. (p. 22)

Constructivism and its Democratic Possibilities

The ideological connections between child-centered pedagogies and neo-liberalism in Spain and in other countries outlined above raise important questions on the role of these pedagogies in promoting democracy. They also question whether such pedagogies can really advance those progressive political ideologies they claim to serve. Based on the analysis unfolded in this article, I would argue that the possibilities for child-centered pedagogy in general, and constructivism in particular, to serve progressive agendas rely on acknowledging their inherently ideological nature and on generating new questions to expose the discursive forces that make them so vulnerable to conservative readings. I offer three examples in this regard.

To assess the progressive possibilities of constructivism one of the first questions to be asked is: what particular versions of child-centered pedagogies have been embraced in the name of democratizing education? As explained in the literature, there are many different conceptions li-

ving under this umbrella term (Phillips, 2000; Rosas & Sebastian, 2001; Terwell, 1999; Windschitl, 2002). When explicitly referring to theories of learning, however, it is evident that these conceptions result in very different educational approaches. The constructivist pedagogies based on Piaget's theory have been instrumental in challenging the information-delivery educational model and in imagining schools as interactive and exciting places (Windschitl, 2002). However, the Piagetian conception of the learner as a little scientist who constructs knowledge on his or her own has proved limited in addressing issues of social equality in multicultural societies. The universal developmental sequence and the individuality of the process of learning proposed by Piaget provide little guidance, for example, when teachers try to understand students' learning differences according to social and cultural backgrounds or students' different expectations of school. Social constructivism, however, has been much more promising in this regard. Vygotsky's understanding of learning as a cultural and collective process involving the teacher, the learner and other members of the community have fostered and legitimized more culturally responsible and culturally respectful pedagogies (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Moll, 1990). Subscribing to this perspective of learning would not allow, for example, the conceptualizing of students with cultural differences, whether those differences are defined in terms of social class, ethnicity, race or any other social category, as "lacking" culture or knowledge. Indeed, the teaching pedagogies grounded in this perspective of learning assume that these students come to school with an abundance of knowledge that may be different from the socially organized knowledge disseminated by school, but that are equally rich and legitimate. From this learning perspective, the role of school would be, precisely, to provide culturally meaningful ways to articulate these two types of knowledge so students can become socially competent without losing their own cultural identity and cultural learning artifacts. Advocating for constructivist pedagogies, therefore, also means to take an ideological stand on the theoretical perspectives that define learning within these pedagogies.

The second important question that needs to be considered when weighing up the democratic possibilities of constructivism is the knowledge(s) that are included and excluded in this pedagogical proposition. One of the big shortcomings of the implementation of child-centered pedagogies around the world is the belief that the only obstacle in such implementation is the lack of teachers' knowledge on these pedagogies. As explained earlier in the article, in Spain this belief led to disregard of teachers' knowledge as well as the disciplinary knowledge developed by those pedagogies that informed

the experimental reform and that, contrary to the psychological pedagogies endorsed by the reform, have developed within the field of education. Tabulawa (2003) adds an additional concern to this issue by exposing the marginalization of local knowledge in countries in which child-centered pedagogies are presented as a required tool on the road to democracy. Tabulawa argues that the advancement of child-centered pedagogy in Botswana by the aid agencies of the Western world required teachers to dismiss their own indigenous pedagogies and to uncritically adopt a perspective of teaching foreign to them.

The last, and more general question, I would like to offer in the exploration of the democratic possibilities of child-centered pedagogies is: How can child-centered pedagogies help to contest, and subvert, the neoliberal discourse that they are currently serving? The limited impact on education in general that some pedagogically innovative moments, such as the progressive movement in USA in the early 20th century or the MRPs in the last period of the dictatorship and the beginning of the democratic era in Spain, remind us public schools have a poor record on sustaining progressive agendas. Indeed, it seems that the commitment toward social justice at the core of many of these innovative pedagogies has been easily co-opted by other forces, such as neoliberalism in the last decades, informing this commitment in more conservative terms. Acknowledging the difficulties and complexities of this task, I would submit that for child-centered pedagogies to counteract these forces, we need a broader and interdisciplinary conversation on the issues that have shaped the fate of these pedagogies in schools. This conversation with other disciplines such as philosophy, history, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, and political science, could provide us with a better understanding of the possibilities of child-centered pedagogies by raising critical questions such as: What are the philosophical traditions that have advanced progressive changes in education? What were the historical junctures that called for progressive changes in education and how did schools respond to these calls? What are the school structures and dynamics that allow or prevent educational transformation? How do the language and verbal codes of school defy or reinforce social relations of power? This conversation would be, undoubtedly, a complicated one. But it would also be, in my opinion, the only way that child-centered pedagogies could become a credible democratic tool in education and could avoid the fatal trap of neoliberal rationality that post-structural theory warns us about, namely, to think of schools as transformational agents while confining the breadth of these changes to the realm of the individual (Peters, 1996; Silva, 2001; Walkerdine, 1984).

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