

## LOOKING BACK AND AHEAD: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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### *Resumo*

Com base nas “questões e desafios” discutidos na última sessão do Encontro, apresenta-se um conjunto de considerações finais que retomam aspectos abordados ao longo deste volume e apontam direcções futuras para o desenvolvimento de uma pedagogia para a autonomia, no quadro de uma prática reflexiva do ensino e da formação de professores.

### *Abstract*

The author presents some final considerations on the basis of “issues and challenges” discussed in the last session of the conference. The text integrates aspects covered in the present volume and points out directions for the development of a pedagogy for autonomy that is framed by reflective teaching and teacher education.

In the last session of the conference, ‘looking back and ahead’ was the theme we adopted for identifying ‘issues and challenges’ educators may have to face when counteracting a pedagogy of dependence in favour of a pedagogy for autonomy in the school context.

Richard Smith, Leslie Bobb-Wolff and myself each made a brief presentation to start the debate, and two colleagues took notes on the ideas put forward by us and audience participants. The synthesis that follows elaborates on these notes and is organised around three main issues: *the virtuous cycle of teacher and learner development*, *the role of teachers in pedagogical research*, and *teaching as a subversive activity*. Each one involves a number of challenges for the present and future of a pedagogy for autonomy which may be of relevance to others who have been trying out approaches to teacher and learner development based on principles similar to ours, asking the same questions and facing the same kind of difficulties and shortcomings.

### **1. The virtuous cycle of teacher and learner development**

What Richard Smith called ‘a virtuous cycle’ of teacher and learner development with reference to the work of the GT-PA can be seen as an

empowering path to changing established routines in a sustainable way. Two strategies seem to have great potential:

- a) the adoption of a common framework of reference for teacher and learner development, where isomorphic, mutually consistent principles for action are worked out and experimented, where what is seen as good or bad for teaching depends on what is seen as good or bad for learning, and where values like individual and social responsibility, critical thought and the right to make choices are regarded as valuable and worth pursuing in teaching/learning contexts;
- b) collaboration among teachers, and among teachers and academic researchers, as ways to counteract the disempowering consequences of isolation in their professional work including lack of self-confidence, over-reliance on one's judgement, fear of exposing oneself to others, imposing oneself on others, under/overestimating personal success, blaming either oneself or others for failure, separating conception from execution (those who 'think' from those who 'teach'), which leads to reinforcing the de-skilling of teachers and the arrogance of academics, and so on.

## **2. The role of teachers in pedagogical research**

This area involves reinforcing the role of teachers in pedagogical research as a means of counteracting the prevailing divorce between pedagogy and research. The main issues are: What counts as valid pedagogical knowledge? Who decides what is important to know? Who controls the construction of knowledge?

A reflective approach to teaching and teacher development seems to be the best way to direct pedagogical enquiry towards teacher and learner concerns and needs. Teacher educators can learn a lot from working with teachers and can facilitate their work in trying to solve relevant pedagogical problems. On the basis of our experience as teacher educators, and particularly within the GT-PA, certain conditions appear to be crucial when research is undertaken by or with teachers; such research should:

- a) be seen as a broad activity that includes not only academic modes of enquiry but also other exploratory modes, with a special emphasis on emancipatory action research;
- b) result from a negotiated agenda that accommodates the participants' diverse background knowledge and experience in complementary ways, thus promoting different gains for different people within a shared view of education as a transformative process;
- c) be flexible enough to allow for diversity at the levels of: working paces, methods of enquiry, degree of rigour and structure, and types of

emerging knowledge (empirical propositions, conceptual schemata, practical proposals, ethical and moral considerations, etc.);

d) be evaluated according to criteria that are relevant to those who carry it out, not by external criteria set outside the research context, no matter how valid these may sound;

e) be primarily disseminated by those who carry it out, in various ways and to various audiences, with a primary focus on describing the processes (what was done, where, why and how, with what problems and results), which requires a more creative use of language than is usually the case in reporting research.

### 3. Teaching as a subversive activity

The concept of subversion is usually associated with ideas of rupture, change and progress. There is, however, another sense of the word that is linked to preventing rupture, change and progress from happening, as when learner autonomy is impeded in favour of fostering passivity and social conformity, thus undermining possibilities of preparing learners to become active agents of social change. This we might call 'enslaving' subversion, a commitment to maintaining the *status quo* in situations where values such as equity, justice or freedom are a threat to established systems. On the other hand, striving to develop learner autonomy in adverse situations so that learners are better equipped to face and challenge a world that demands critical thought and action is a 'liberating' subversive activity. This is the kind of subversion that teachers engage in when they decide to promote learner autonomy, and it might be seen as involving:

a) being realistic without becoming pessimistic, optimistic without becoming uncritical, critical without becoming cynical;

b) looking critically at one's teaching context, identifying constraints to the fulfilment of pedagogical ideals and finding spaces of freedom to start exploring alternatives that best meet those ideals in ways that improve learning conditions;

c) taking practical, sustainable steps to counteract prevailing ideologies and practices that hamper learners' right to autonomy;

d) finding one's voice and asserting one's right to challenge authority in all its forms (educational policies, national syllabuses, external examinations, textbooks, school regulations, peer pressure, etc.);

e) learning to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity in situations where ready-made solutions are not available, where steps taken do not have the expected results, or where tensions and dilemmas seem inescapable;

f) knowing oneself and learning to 'read one's own biography' in order to understand one's role in education: what it is and how it came to be as it is, what it can become and how.

Going back to the metaphor I used in the first text of this book- 'swimming with or against the tide' - let me take up again the questions I asked the teachers, future teachers and teacher educators:

*With or against the tide, are we always aware of the direction we take?  
With or against the tide, what determines our choice of direction?*

Both questions imply a basic requirement for change - self-direction - which in turn demands self-examination: What is important for each one of us? How do we explain the way we think and act? Do we want to move in a different direction?

Self-examination can be seen as the basic subversive act to start any kind of (inner) change and is surely at the heart of the work of the GT-PA, as it is at the heart of any attempt to challenge the world around us. This is where the suggestion presented by Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner in the book *Teaching as a subversive activity* (Penguin Education Specials, pp. 193-94) seems very relevant. I hope that readers will agree. For me as I first read this passage, it was like going back to basics, or stepping back from where I stand, something that we sometimes need to do however disturbing it may be, in order to better understand ourselves as professionals in education.

Our last suggestion is perhaps the most difficult. It requires honest self-examination. Ask yourself how you came to know whatever things you feel are worth knowing. This may sound like a rather abstract enquiry, but when taken seriously it frequently results in startling discoveries. For example, some teachers have discovered that there is almost nothing valuable they know that was *told* to them by someone else. Other teachers have discovered that their most valuable knowledge was *not* learned in a recognizable sequence. Still others begin to question the meaning of the phrase 'valuable knowledge' and wonder if anything they learned in school was 'valuable'. Such self-examination can be most unsettling, as you can well imagine. English teachers have discovered that they hate Shakespeare; history teachers, that everything they know about the Wars of the Roses is useless; science teachers, that they really wanted to be druggists. The process, once begun, leads in many unexpected directions but most often to the question 'Why am I a teacher, anyway?'. Some honest answers that this question has produced are as follows:

I can control people.

I can tyrannize people.

I have captive audiences.

I have my summers off.

I love seventeenth-century non-dramatic Elizabethan literature.

I don't know.

The pay is good, considering the amount of work I actually do.

Obviously, none of these answers is very promising for the future of our children. But each in its way is a small act of positive subversion because it represents a teacher's honest attempt to know himself. The teacher that *recognizes* that he is interested, say, in exercising tyrannical control over others is taking a first step towards subverting that interest. But the question 'Why am I a teacher, anyway?' also produces answers that are

encouraging. For example, that one can participate in the making of intelligence and, thereby, in the development of a decent society. As soon as a teacher recognizes that this is, in fact, the reason he became a teacher, than the subversion of our existing educational system strikes him as a necessity. As we have been trying to say: we agree.

The need to subvert the system in order to help students learn how to learn is one of the main messages of the authors in their book. Thirty-some years after it was published, the message is still relevant, despite the changes that have occurred in educational discourses and practices. Today, as in the past, striving towards autonomy means learning to cope with the contradictions of the system and finding one's way through the complexities of teaching and learning, not to make teaching and learning simple, but more rational and just.

All the ideas presented above should be understood as much more than just 'normative discourse' or 'ideological statements', since they have been explored through school-based work with teachers and students. They integrate *a practical theory of teacher and learner development* whose potential and limitations *in practice* have been reflected upon within the GT-PA. For us, as for others who share our concerns and goals, they can certainly be seen as springboards for continuing enquiry and experimentation in the field.