

Socio-educational Research in Argentina: a Brief Historical Account and Current Situation

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1. Introduction:

Cooperation among Argentine and Japanese educational researchers goes without much precedent. The most relevant work dates from some decades ago, written by Marcela Mollis (1990), and is on universities in both countries within the framework of a training scholarship program⁽¹⁾. This cooperation marks a new chapter thanks to a global academic event held in 2014⁽²⁾, in which Asian—particularly Japanese—and Argentine researchers exchanged views on the problems of educational expansion of secondary schools in these two different regional contexts.

The purpose of this brief work is to make public to those unfamiliar with the educational realities of distant geographies, the contributions of the sociology of education in Argentina, as well as the main concerns today. This work is far from exhaustive, but it does seek to encourage to find points of dialog and cooperation with researches which objects of study are education systems and the realities they cross.

2. On the Argentine socio-educational field of study

Argentina is a country in the southern American cone that stands out for an early schooling process that begins in the late XIX when elementary education becomes compulsory. Education was a powerful political tool for the formation of a heterogeneous population as a result of big migratory waves coming mainly

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from Europe and which took place from late XIX to the Second World War. Therefore, education played a key role in the popular imaginary, as a means towards the social integration and upward mobility of the population.

Despite the heavy weight of education in the public sphere, sociology as an academic discipline gives the study of education a somewhat peripheral and subordinate place (Tenti Fanfani, 1988). It is thus more accurate to speak of the field of "socio-educational" research, which gathers researchers from various social and human sciences, such as pedagogy, anthropology, political sciences, history, and also sociology. This created a heterogeneous field of study, in which diverse disciplinary traditions and conceptual frameworks that do not necessarily refer back to sociology coexist. However, it is worth highlighting the early influence of French thought, particularly that of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault. Moreover, it goes without saying that educational researchers do not only have purely academic backgrounds, many times they fill positions as officials or education policy decision-makers, this leads to a transfer of knowledge between both spaces.

Also, one characteristic of the Argentine socio-educational tradition is the methodological approach. Qualitative researches are widely preferred over quantitative ones. This could be due to a set of factors: mainly due to structural deficiencies, namely, the poor statistic data provided by governmental institutions makes it difficult to access data bases and this results in discontinuous statistical series –many times non-comparable–, etc.; due to short materials resources because the low investment in research allows more limited research works –this means a handful of schools education-wise, to the detriment of more extensive and bulkier assessments; due to the marginal status of education itself as granted by general sociology, which causes the sociologists pursuing quantitative research –related even to education issues– not to relate or feel part of the socio-educational field of study; moreover, there is a weakened statistical training among socio-educational researchers; lastly, as the most recent phenomenon, due to the prevalence of theoretical frameworks that strongly recover the perspective of the social actor. These factors, each with different significance levels, result in a lack of imagination regarding the sort of quantitative research that could be conducted.

3. A Brief Account on Argentine Socio-educational Research

Academic sociology in Argentina became established in the late 1950's (Pereyra, 2007). Gino Germani is then in charge of the career of sociology and seeks to found a "scientific sociology" with a modernizing approach, based on an empirical research of a quantitative sort, along with a structuralist and functionalist theoretical perspective. During this process, the young sociology trainees take part in researches that seek to go deep into the Argentine social structure in its diverse dimensions, which gives origin to the first quantitative studies on education.

This project of "scientific sociology" ends with the dictatorship of 1966, which intervenes the universities. Moreover, Germani's mark on sociology receives strong criticism and suffers the attack of critical perspectives associated with the left and Peronism –which takes place in a context of deep political radicalization–, discrediting those quantitative researches, which will later impact on the characteristics of the socio-educational field.

Since the years 1970 and 1980, a series of works mark the beginning of a new stage in socio-educational studies. These, according to critical theories, bore a macrostructural look and made a very general analysis of the Argentine education system (Tiramonti and Fuentes, 2012).

From 1976 to 1983, Argentina was under the last dictatorial government, hence the issue of authoritarianism and concerns about the democratization of institutions acquired special relevance. By mid 1980's, the work of Cecilia Braslavsky entitled "La discriminación educativa en Argentina" [Education Discrimination in Argentina] (1985) will leave a strong mark in the field of sociology of education. It settles the concern on the segmentation of the education system in circles of different quality that run according to differences in social status.

In the 1990's, there is an educational reform that deeply modifies the structure of the Argentine education system –which is implemented within a context of social impoverishment and polarization resulting from neo-liberal policies. 1990's researches echo this special political situation. The outcome of said reform, which was highly criticized by teachers and the population, was the fragmentation of the education system (Tiramonti, 2004), in particular in secondary education. Edu-

cational fragments are characterized by the social and cultural homogeneity of the population they include and organized around very different cultural and social concepts; clearly connected with the sector of the community they accommodate (Tiramonti, 2004).

The process of reform of the 1990's, which modifies the social morphology of the country, unleashes a profound crisis in the year 2001, when extreme poverty hits the schools. Later, amidst a process of economic recovery, during the decade of 2000, a set of laws is enacted, among which stands out the new law of national education that seeks to offset some of the effects of the 90's reform. This law broadens the number of compulsory school years, thus extending compulsoriness to all the years of secondary schooling. This new piece of legislation highly permeates the research agenda and secondary education is given greater protagonism when appointed the sphere of social integration of youngsters.

4. Today's agenda of socio-educational research

Over the last decades, Argentina's socio-educational field is structured around one main concern: educational inequality. Since the 1980's, researchers explore its many dimensions, structural and institutional factors that impact on it, consequences at the level of the individual and how it affects social and working integration of youngsters. Recent changes in the legislation raise the concern of researchers and are in line with the equality-inequality paradigm.

The dominant inequality within the education system in Argentina, which is seen as fragmented, perceptibly shows how social status strongly conditions educational backgrounds, acquired learnings and future prospects.

Some research approaches follow an already long tradition⁽³⁾. On the one hand, some researches inquire about the sphere of education in relation with labor, now focusing on the socio-working type of transitions, backgrounds and integration. While on the other, others inquire about teacher representations of students, generally inspired by the works of Bourdieu. This sort of work is connected with those that recently ask about the teacher identity, the meaning teachers give to the school and their work. These become highly significant in the face of the deterioration of institutional mechanisms as provoked by the widespread growth of

secondary education and changes in society and culture.

To the above, we should add studies interested in school bonds, sociability, cohabitation and situations of violence, especially among peers; over the last years, interest on these dimensions has grown taking into consideration the student as a youngster, i.e. broadening the look on the construction of the individual in the school.

A topic that arouses interest in the socio-educational field is the analysis of education policies, in particular those inquiring about inclusion strategies in sectors that are still excluded from secondary education. These studies also accompany others that propose to analyze the school as a device and how it affects the inclusion-exclusion processes of youngsters. The study of the traditional secondary "institutional model", which role was to select the best students, becomes significant when the order is to include the entire population in the same device.

Lastly, although they are not considered of great relevance in the whole of researches, they do offer original approaches that deal with aspects of social reality, which now begin to be dominant in the field of general sociology. Researches inquiring about emotions, the configuration of bodies, gender, sexuality in school settings have aroused greater interest over the last years.

5. Closing words

As shown, the socio-educational field in Argentina is marked by its heterogeneity, by the presence of researchers from different areas, who sometimes have hybrid professional backgrounds that include the academia and policy decision-making. This led to the low level of institutionalization of the field, but it also enriches it with different viewpoints. Moreover, it is the qualitative strategies that are strongly implemented and, at the same time, are rescued the theoretical frameworks that highlight the central role of the actor and logics of action within a structurally conditioned reality.

In this brief account, our purpose was to show, in broad terms, the development of socio-educational studies in Argentina and the main concerns included in the research agenda today. The possibility of finding points of contact with Japan's sociology of education that would later enable ways of cooperation and that

could enrich our own research was part of our main objective. We hope to have achieved so and that this opportunity will be an invitation for fruitful exchanges between both countries.

Notes

- (1) Mollis, a researcher on history of education and contrastive education, fellow by the Japan Foundation, did a residency at the University of Nagoya.
- (2) Within the context of the XVIIIISA World Congress (Yokohama, July 2014) the session "Global Educational Expansion of Secondary Schools" was organized, coordinated by Shinichi Aizawa; there the author also gave a lecture.
- (3) Here are the main topics of interest among Argentine researchers that study secondary education; this selection is the result of a greater knowledge in the field of study and to the fact that it has gained special relevance over the last years. For that, we used the data base on the production of knowledge on secondary education in Argentina, created by FLACSO with the support of UNICEF, in which are collected research projects and publications from 2003 to 2015. Available at: <http://baseries.flacso.org.ar/site/index><http://baseries.flacso.org.ar/site/index>

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