Constructivism and Ideology: Lessons from the Spanish Curriculum Reform of the 1980s

Constructivismo e ideología: lecciones de la reforma curricular española en los ochenta

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Abstract

Most developing countries have recently undertaken deep educational reforms to prepare their citizenship to the needs of an era of global market and technological information. In terms of the curriculum, most of these reforms have embraced constructivism as a crucial tool for educational change and have presented this notion as inherently democratic. The theoretical analysis offered in this article intends to challenge the international worship to child-centered pedagogies as the guarantor of democratic ideals and to raise the question of the ideological role of constructivism in education reforms. It addresses this question by scrutinizing the Spanish curriculum reform that took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s under the first socialist administration. Formulated from a poststructuralist perspective, the argument presented in this analysis is that constructivism in this reform served as the carrier of the neoliberal agenda of the time by "psychologizing" the learner and by conceptualizing educational change as a process confined within the limits of the student. Based on this analysis, this article reflects on the democratic possibilities of the notion of constructivism. The conclusion of this reflection is that that such possibilities rest on the acknowledgement of the inherently ideological nature of constructivism. Identifying this ideological quality, this article concludes, allows us to see the dangers of the discursive forces that give this notion a conservative reading and to engage in

Revista de Educación, 356. Septiembre-diciembre 2011, pp. 83-105
Fecha de entrada: 16-02-2011   Fecha de aceptación: 06-05-2011

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a broader and interdisciplinary conversation on how to respond to these forces with a much more ideologically progressive agenda.

Keywords: constructivism, ideology, curriculum reform, child-centered pedagogies, neoliberal rationality, poststructuralism, psychologizing the learner, governmentality.

Resumen

Muchos de los países en desarrollo han emprendido recientemente importantes reformas educativas para preparar a sus ciudadanos para un mercado global y las nuevas tecnologías de información. En relación al currículo, la mayoría de estas reformas han recurrido al constructivismo como un instrumento crucial para llevar a cabo estos cambios educativos y han presentado esta noción como inherentemente democrática. El análisis teórico que se ofrece en este artículo intenta cuestionar este culto internacional a las pedagogías centradas en el alumno como la garantía de los ideales democráticos en la escuela y formula la pregunta de cuál es el papel ideológico que estas pedagogías juegan en las reformas educativas. Este artículo responde a esta pregunta evaluando críticamente la reforma curricular española liderada por la primera administración socialista en los años ochenta y noventa. Formulado desde la perspectiva postestructuralista, el argumento que se presenta en este análisis es que el constructivismo en esta reforma sirvió como instrumento a la ideología neoliberal del momento al «psicologizar» al estudiante y conceptualizar el cambio educativo dentro de los confines del estudiante como individuo. Basado en este análisis, este artículo reflexiona sobre las posibilidades democráticas del constructivismo. La conclusión de esta reflexión es que dichas posibilidades se encuentran en el reconocimiento expreso de la naturaleza ideológica del constructivismo. Se concluye argumentando que es la identificación de esta cualidad ideológica lo que nos permitirá ver los peligros de las fuerzas discursivas que le dan a esta noción su carácter conservador e iniciar una conversación mas amplia e interdisciplaria sobre cómo responder a estas fuerzas discursivas con una agenda ideológica mucho más progresista.

Palabras clave: constructivismo, ideología, reforma curricular, pedagogías centradas en el alumno, racionalidad neoliberal, postestructuralismo, psicologización del estudiante, gubernamentalidad.

Most developing countries have recently undertaken deep educational reforms to prepare their citizenship for the needs of an era of global market and technological information. Structurally, many of these reforms share important similarities, particularly the emphasis on the process of decentralization. Samoff (1999), for example, explains

how educational reforms in Africa in the 1990s made similar recommendations for countries with very different historical and socioeconomic contexts: "Decentralize. Increase school fees. Expand private schooling. Reduce direct support to students, especially at the tertiary level. Introduce double shifts and multigrade classrooms. Assign high priority to instructional materials. Favor in-service over pre-service teacher education" (p. 51). A similar pattern can be seen in Latin America. In most countries of the southern cone, the neoliberal policies of the 1980s coincided with the process of political democratization suggesting that decentralization and school privatization would be the best way to make education equitable and accessible to all students (Aikman, 2000; Arnove, Franz, Mollis & Torres, 1999; Gentili 1997).

An important aspect of these reforms that have attracted less attention in the literature but that is particularly interesting for this study is the identification of constructivist perspectives as a fundamental tool in countries pursuing democratic changes (Domínguez de Montoya, 2008; Niyozov, 2009; Tabulawa, 2003; Woo & Simmons, 2008). Whether the goal of educational changes is referred to as "developing critical thinkers," "teaching for meaning," "transformative teaching," or "child-centered pedagogies," one of the main pedagogical assumptions of most recent reforms is that a more autonomous and independent student will successfully undertake the major challenges demanded by democratic regimes. Tabulawa (2003) refers to the power of this assumption in the educational policies implemented by the governmental agencies involved in policy and economic development in non-Western countries by stating that learner-centered pedagogies are "[o]ften singled out… as the nexus between education and the broader principle of democracy" (p. 8) . On these grounds, constructivism, almost regardless of the version of this notion advanced in each of the reforms, appears as an intrinsically good idea. More importantly, it is presented as a concept ideologically aligned with the most progressive and democratic forces in education.

This article intends to challenge this international worship of child-centered pedagogies as the guarantor of democratic ideals and to raise the question of the ideological role of constructivism in education reforms. It addresses this question by analyzing the Spanish curriculum reform that took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s under the first socialist administration. Formulated from a poststructuralist perspective, the argument presented in this analysis is that constructivism in this reform served as the carrier of the neoliberal agenda of the time by "psychologizing" the learner and by conceptualizing educational change as a process confined within the limits of the student. Based on this analysis, this article reflects on

the democratic possibilities of the notion of constructivism. The conclusion of this reflection is that that such possibilities rest on the acknowledgement of the inherently ideological nature of constructivism. Identifying this ideological quality, this article concludes, allows us to see the dangers of the discursive forces that give this notion a conservative reading and to engage in a broader and interdisciplinary conversation on how to respond to these forces with a much more ideologically progressive agenda.

Curriculum Reform and Democratic Process in the First Socialist Administration in Spain

With the benefit of history, understanding the curriculum reform implemented in the 1990s under the socialist leadership also allows us to understand the context of larger political changes in Spain at that time. As we remember, this reform was prompted by the overwhelming victory of Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) in 1982, and the desire for change expressed by most Spaniards in this election. Understanding that "education is a crucial component of democracy" (Maravall, 1987, p.70), education became immediately one of the first targets of political change and a set of laws were passed. Let's remember that The *Law of University Reform* was passed in 1983 and that only two years later, in 1985, the parliament approved the *Right to Organic Education Act,* the legislation that articulated the new rights to public education extended to all Spaniards by the new 1978 Constitution. Finally, in 1990 the parliament approved the *Reform Law of Compulsory Education* (LOGSE), the ambitious law that intended to reform the entire system of compulsory education and that constitutes the core of this analysis. As we remember, the most important objectives pursued by this legislation were to increase the age of free and compulsory education from 14 to 16 years, to restructure compulsory education into three different levels, to modernize vocational education, and to improve the overall quality of education (Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia, 1995).

It is important to note here the deliberative process that guided the approval of this law. As a reaction to the strongly present memory of the dictatorship at the time and the top-down decision making system of this regime, the design of the LOGSE was conceptualized and implemented in two phases. The first one, roughly

1983 to 1986, was meant to be of an experimental and innovative nature and invited schools that wished to participate in this process to try new ways of teaching and new curriculum models. The second phase was conceived as a time to compile the materials developed in the experimental stage, to discuss them, and to elaborate the final proposal to be endorsed by official law. In this second phase the Ministry of Education submitted several documents for debate such as the 1987 *Plan for the Reform of Education: A Proposal for Debate* (Proyecto para la Reforma de la Enseñanza, Propuesta para Debate) and its 1988 sister document *Plan for the Reform of Vocational Education: a Proposal for Debate* (Formación Professional: proyecto para la reforma de la educación técnico profesional). The final proposal based on the debate of these documents was released in 1989 under the title *White Book for Educational Reform* (Libro blanco para la reforma del sistema educativo). This proposal contained the structural and curriculum proposal later endorsed by the LOGSE (Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia, 1989).

While the approval of the law was the main legislative goal, curriculum reform and professional development were identified from the very beginning as the engine of the changes that would inform the LOGSE (Martinez Bonafé, 2001). This call to rethink these two areas was, understandably, enthusiastically embraced by groups with a strong tradition of pedagogical innovation such as the Movements for Pedagogical Renewal (MRPS- Movimientos de Renovación Pedagógica) that had been consciously struggling in these two areas. In terms of professional development, these groups had been working with an informal network of teacher training activities that promoted innovative educational practices as well as the marriage of theory and practice. The Ministry of Education adopted this model in 1984 with the creation of the Centers for Teacher Training (CEPS- Centros de Educación del Profesorado), a decentralized teacher development space that provided educators with the opportunity to decide on their professional development needs according to the various curriculum projects developed in the first experimental phase of the reform.

In the area of curriculum, the main focus of this article, the MRPS had developed different proposals and had advocated for teachers to become their main protagonists and designers of the education reform. This perspective was also embraced by the Ministry of Education in the experimental phase of the reform by inviting teachers in the MRPS and other groups to implement creative curriculums in their schools. Particularly important for our analysis here are the theoretical grounds for the pedagogical proposals developed by these groups. Gimeno Sacristán (1995) succinctly

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summarizes these approaches and their importance for the experimental reform when he recounts,

> 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*]

The reader will recognize in this quotation many of the theoretical propositions that we now identify as a part of a constructivist model. To the extent that it was these propositions that energized many teachers during the last period of the political dictatorship, it is not surprising that the experimental phase of the official reform also echoed this perspective and that it embraced constructivist pedagogies as an important tool in the development of innovative curriculum options.

The endorsement of this rich pedagogical tradition elicited interesting curriculum proposals in those schools that engaged in the first and voluntary phase of the reform. Looking back at this stage of the reform, however, we can notice that the second stage of the reform was not grounded in the promises for educational change embedded in this tradition. As many authors have explained, and lamented, the constructivist notion embraced by the Ministry of Education in the official curriculum proposal in the late 1980s significantly departed from the pedagogical tradition that had energized so many educators in the early 1980s (Gimeno Sacristán, 1995; Plataforma Asturiana de Educación Crítica, 1998; Rodríguez, 2001; Varela, 1991, 2007). As these authors explain, during the experimental reform, curriculum changes were undertaking the motto of an "open curriculum" and drew upon the wide range of pedagogical perspectives mentioned above. In the second stage (1986 to 1989), however, the grounds for

this curriculum moved, almost exclusively, to the terrain of educational psychology. Ideologically, this move may seem innocuous and still compatible with democratic reforms. A closer look at this shift, however, will reveal some new and interesting conceptual elements for our analysis and will challenge the notion of constructivism as a natural ally of these reforms.

The "Psychologization" of the Curriculum

The official proposal for curriculum reform was also heavily informed by constructivism, but by a very different constructivist perspective. Despite the sustaining of both the language and the rhetoric of reform, the *Diseño Curricular Base* (1989), which conveyed the terms of the final curriculum proposal, embraced a curriculum proposition that was homogeneous in nature and that left out pedagogical alternatives outside of the field of educational psychology. This preference for the discipline of psychology is hardly surprising when realizing that this final curriculum proposal was commissioned to a group of professionals in Catalonia led by Cesar Coll, the educational psychologist whose work *Psychology and Curriculum* (Psicología y Curriculum) became the most emblematic text of the official stage of the reform. In this text, Coll (1991) clearly stated that the main feature of this proposal was its constructivist nature. For him, the final design of the curriculum officially endorsed by 1989 *Diseño Curricular Base:*

> […] 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*]

The clear shift from pedagogical traditions of constructivism to a more psychological perspective can be conceptualized as a move from a concern with the social and political context of education to the concern for "the" learner and the curriculum that

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could ideally teach him/her in every situation. (Cascante, 1995; Martinez Bonafé, 2001; Varela, 1991). In the former, curriculum was understood as a tool for social action. In the later, curriculum seemed to have become a school-bounded effort to design learning experiences that the learner could maximize on his or her own.

Martinez Bonafé (2001) sheds some light on this shift in constructivist perspectives by explaining how the pedagogical alternatives constructed under the political dictatorship that progressive educators endorsed in the experimental phase of the reform were experienced from the discourse of social commitment. Framed as the "cuestión escolar", or the school question, this commitment represented a permanent search for how to make schools an element of political transformation. In this search, he explains how the MRPS and other innovative educational forces had maintained connections with other social organizations such as labor unions, civic associations, feminist groups, etc. that composed the plurality of positions within the political left at the moment. He further explains how the discourse dominating the official curriculum proposal phase was limited and impoverished by identifying psychological constructivism as the magical key that would open all of the possible pedagogical and curriculum doors. In his view, and in the view of many other critics (Cascante 1995, 1997; Plataforma Asturiana de Educación Crítica, 1998; Varela, 1991, 2007), the final curriculum proposal dismissed the progressive forces that had informed this process so far and subsequently adopted cognitive psychology as the basis of the curriculum. By placing such emphasis on a psychological foundation of curriculum, these authors argue, the conversation on educational change narrowed and created a new psychological jargon that distracted teachers' attention from the liberating foci of what to teach and why and how to teach. Such psychological jargon was particularly pervasive in the developing of the *Educational Project* (Proyecto Educativo) and the *Curricular Project* (Proyecto Curricular) required by the LOGSE. While these were very rich projects with an incredible potential for inspiring change, the new reliance on the expertise of educational psychology made this process technocratic and bureaucratic. The main goal of professional development in this stage, for example, became to familiarize teachers with the technical information necessary to design school curriculum based on psychological knowledge.

It is important to note here that the shift in the pedagogical traditions from the experimental to the official phase of the reform also signified a shift in the overarching questions that led the reform. In the consuming and demanding process of elaborating school curriculums according to the new psychological expertise, teachers became less involved in conversations about *what* to teach and *why* and,

subsequently, they devoted most of their energies to the discussion of *how* to teach. Accordingly, the evaluation of the curriculum reform schools was conducted primarily in relation to how close it was to the proposal elaborated by the curriculum experts designed by the educational administration.

Reflecting back on this curriculum shift, one of the temptations is to explain it as natural consequence of embarking on a national reform at a time when the discipline of psychology was making its grand appearance in education. It is also tempting to see this shift as an effort to overcome the complexities of the deliberative process started in the experimental reform by choosing a curriculum option that seemed to offer technical guidance to teachers in the designing and implementation of curriculum. While these explanations are probably true in some fundamental ways, looking at this shift from the larger political sociopolitical and economic changes of the country in the 1980s reveals other ideological reasons. To identify these ideological reasons and their meaning for the curriculum reform in Spain we need to now take a short historical detour and an excursion into political theory.

Integration into Europe and the Rise of Neoliberal Economic Policies

A historical look at the 1980s, the decade that witnessed the transition between the experimental and the official stages of the reform, reminds us that the main political event at that time was Spain's integration into the European Community. The process of applying for this integration had started in 1977 with the first elected government of the political transition and had been inspired 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. It was in 1986, however, that the country was granted this integration at which point Spain had to implement the political and economic guidelines of the European Community. By the time this membership took place, however, 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.

This pressure from the forces of globalization as experienced by the European market were coupled with internal political and economic forces in the country that saw the integration into the European Community as both, the justification and the reward to overcome the restricted experience of the country's market policies under Franco (Holman, 1996). The consequence of this political juncture was the implementation of neoliberal policies by the socialist administration that advanced a structural reform through the liberalization of the market by creating more part-time and temporary jobs, increasing labor market flexibility, and privatizing major state-owned companies (McVeigh, 2005).

While supported by many, these neoliberal measures were very difficult for a country seeking to establish a state with higher standards for social welfare and eventually 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, the latter demanded a higher share of the economic benefits of the decade that they felt they had aided by signing the social pact (Pactos de la Moncloa) during the political transition. The socialist administration, 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 prospect did not improve when entering the new decade. With the Maasctricht 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 just 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 that further flexibilized the market and that attracted foreign capital to the country (Holman, 1996).

What is particularly interesting for our analysis here is that the political energy and appetite for social reforms that took the socialist party to power in 1982 did not materialized in an alternative, or even a serious resistance movement to the neoliberal policies of the late 1980s that eroded the profoundly desired welfare program. Despite all the social conflicts of the moment, the transition to a neoliberal economy became inevitable and occurred undisrupted by the social forces that had formerly unified the post-dictatorship nation. This fact raises the question of how a society so deeply politicized in the previous decade could "surrender" to neoliberalism in such a short period of time. While not providing a full answer to this question, poststructuralist

theory provides important insights into the rhetorical and administrative measures that shaped the dynamics behind neoliberal policies. Such insights will also prove particularly helpful when rethinking the curriculum the shift described above in relation to these policies.

Neoliberalism as a New Political "Rationality"

From a poststructuralist perspective, neoliberalism is much more than a political doctrine implemented by any government. It is a political rationality that implies a new way of thinking about government that changes the relationship between governments and individuals (Foucault, 1991; Gordon, 1991; Burchell, 1993; Rose, 1992, 1996; Barry, Osborne & Rose, 1996). According to this rationality, neoliberalism, as well as its classic version, liberalism, constitute neither a particular political theory nor a method of government but, rather, a defined way of thinking about the nature of governmental practices, a way of identifying who governs, who is governed, and what governing means (Gordon, 1991). It is this political rationality that, in the opinion of the theorists in this area, makes forms and practices of government thinkable and practicable, not only for those who are the practitioners of government, but also for those upon whom government is exercised. Implied in this definition is an understanding of the nature of governing as something very different from the imposition on the "governed" of those practices or ideologies intended by government. There is an understanding that the rationality of government is constructed as a complex interplay of different practices but which always includes the active participation of those who are being governed.

Foucault (1991) termed this political rationality *governmentality* and explained it as a departure from former understanding 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 as "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 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).

But rationality, in both liberalism and neoliberalism, according to foucauldian scholars, 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 initiatives 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 again so business can flourish and the market can grow. In the same way, 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 this rationality takes an interesting turn. Beneath these contradictions the government not only defines practices in relation to the market but, more importantly, also advocates for the market itself to become the rationality for government. Neoliberalism does not treat the market as an independent entity. On the contrary, it understands the market 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 entre-preneurial 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).

Burchell's quotation also speaks for the new role of 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 best effect, neoliberalism proposes that all forms of conduct work with the same rationality as the market: imbued with an entrepreneurial rationality. Such rationality not only does include the individual but it makes him or her a fundamental pillar of this rationality. Not only are individuals called upon to display their rationality but they are also asked to take responsibility for themselves, to assume their life as a personal project for themselves, to become 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 incursion into the notion of political rationality and the construction of an enterprising self that identifies the individual as the main site responsible for decisions becomes very useful when trying to understand the outcomes of the tensions that the Europeanization process presented at this moment. It is particularly useful to understand how some of the social problems that Spain was experiencing as part of the neoliberal economic policies that were required to become a full member of the European Market were also redefined as individual rather than social problems and were, therefore, located outside of the responsibility of the state. The socially accepted fact of mass unemployment in the early 1990s and the little resistance that unions and social organizations presented, for example, could be explained by the articulation of the enterprising culture and the enterprising self in Gordon's (1991) term:

> 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 enterprise. 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).

Curriculum Reform as the Articulation of the New Neoliberal Rationality

The understanding of the neoliberal rationality and the enterprising culture it fosters provides us with new lenses to look at the curriculum reform engineered by the LOGSE. Taking these lenses, the new discursive relations of power that emerged in the reform era devoided the curriculum from the ideological possibilities imagined in the first phase of the reform. Following the analysis articulated above, it can be argued that, just as the state in neoliberalism was no longer responsible for the well-being of its citizens but for the provision of the enterprising culture in which individuals were expected to thrive, the curriculum reform exempted schools from the responsibility of having students achieving specific school knowledge and redefined its role as providing students with the conditions under which the students could maximize their own learning experience. In this argument, the new constructivist curriculum grounded in psychology would allow students, as Coll (1995) stated earlier, to make meaningful apprenticeships on their own. In this context, learning was understood as an act of personal enterprise removed from the milieu in which it took place. As Tuschling & Engemann (2006) state, "the center of attention [was] no longer the curriculum that learners have to master but their abilities to organize themselves and to perceive and use their circumstances as learning opportunities" (p. 458).

In this new understanding of the role of schools, the constructivist notion of the learner articulated by Coll (1991 & 1995), and later adopted by the official curriculum of the LOGSE, could be easily identified as the enterprising self needed by the new neoliberal rationality now pervasive in the country. While the decision to ground the curriculum in psychology and to make the learner the main recipient of education may have appeared at the moment of the curriculum shift in the late 1980s as an "innocent" choice, the neoliberal context in which this shift took place made this choice an ideological move to more conservative views of school. In essence, the official curriculum reform opted for a notion of the learner stripped of his/her socio, historical, and cultural contexts that, consequently, limited learning to the confines of the individual and understood this process as one of self-benefit. The psychological foundations of the official curriculum did not allow for an analysis of the learner as a historical subject or for an analysis of teaching as a part of different discourses of power and resistance. Instead, from this psychological perspective, the democratic role of the school was fulfilled through the constructivist approach to teaching

that calls for the design of best possible curriculum according to the expertise of educational psychology and assumes the individual to be a free and autonomous entity that chooses to benefit from the learning processes provided in this curriculum.

Rethinking Constructivism

It would be unfair to conclude from this analysis that the constructivist perspective carried by the LOGSE should be blamed for the neoliberalization of education in the 1990s. After all, as I am reminded in my conversations with teachers who experienced this reform, constructivism never changed school practices dramatically. Indeed, some teachers never believed or engaged in constructivist teaching despite the demands of the new curriculum reform. It would be fair to say, however, that the psychological constructivism endorsed by this reform was ideologically loaded and that it worked toward the dismantling of the progressive pedagogies in place in the early 1980s.

This claim of the role of constructivism in advancing neoliberal ideologies finds new grounds when looking at other education reforms around the world. Silva (1998) argues that many of the curriculum reforms implemented in South America in the 1990s were also neoliberal in nature as they were also grounded in the same individualistic pedagogies, that he refers to as "pedagogies psy", at the core of the Spanish curriculum reform. Woo and Simmons (2008) illustrates how the creation of child-centered teaching and learning strategies was the basis of the new New National Curriculum Framework adopted by the Afghanistan Ministry of Education in 2002. Tabulawa (2003) further 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). This author 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-learned practices as their official pedagogy not because of their educational merits but because of its ideological intentions. Tabulawa explains how 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 our conclusion on the Spanish curriculum reform, his study of the USAID

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programs in Botswana in the 1980s in the areas of pre-service and in-service training led him to conclude that child-centered pedagogies were an indispensable tool for the neoliberal policies that promoted liberal democracy in the country. In his view:

> 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).

It is important to note here that the contention of this author is not with the fact that constructivism was expected to contribute to the democratization of the country (although he challenges the educational record of this perspective in attaining this goal). Rather, what he contends is the specific Westernized version of democracy promoted from this perspective and the assumptions held by the aid agencies that African students need such pedagogies because they are unable to contest authority and to think critically and independently.

The strong connections between child-centered pedagogies and neoliberal agenda of 1980s and 1990s raise important questions about the role of these pedagogies in promoting democracy. Indeed, they raise the fundamental question of whether such pedagogies can be seen as a legitimate ally in advancing more progressive political ideologies like the ones envisioned by many Spanish educators in the early 1980s. Based on the analysis unfolded in this work, I would like to answer this question by suggesting that it is precisely by recognizing their ideological nature and by contextualizing them within the discursive forces that reinforce or disrupt relations of power that constructivism could become a real tool for democratic reforms. This recognition, in my opinion, involves considering some aspects of constructivism usually ignored and to call for a larger interdisciplinary conversation on the discursive forces that can sustain progressive efforts in schools.

The first element that I think is important to consider when calibrating the democratic possibilities of constructivism is the fact that there are many different conceptions living under this umbrella term (Phillips, 2000; Rosas & Sebastian,

2001; Terwell, 1999). All these conceptions share an understanding of knowledge as constructed and relational. When explicitly referring to theories of learning, however, it is evident that they 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. However, the Piagetian conception of the learner as a little scientist who constructs knowledge on his or her own even when experimenting with the social world around her or him has proved limited in addressing the fundamental issues of our 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 from school. Social constructivism, however, has been much more promising in this regard. Vygotsky's reliance on the psychological tools socially developed (Kozulin, 1998) and his 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 (Delpit, 1995; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Moll, 1990). Subscribing to this perspective of learning would not allow, for example, to conceptualize culturally different students, whether we define this difference in terms of social class, ethnicity, race or any other social category, as students who "lack" culture or knowledge. Indeed, the teaching pedagogies grounded in this perspective of learning always assume that these students come to school with an abundance of knowledge and experience that may be different from the socially organized knowledge and experiences 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 and experience 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 perspective that defines learning in these pedagogies.

The second important element that we need to take into consideration when weighing the democratic possibilities of constructivism is that no theoretical choice translates neatly, or easily, into school practices. I would argue that one of the big shortcomings of the implementation of child-centered pedagogies around the world, including Spain, was caused by the belief that the only obstacle in such implementation is the lack of teachers' knowledge on these pedagogies. Contesting this belief, Tabulawa

(2003) 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. Windschitl (2002) further helps us to understand the difficulties of implementing constructivist perspectives in schools by explaining some of the dilemmas in which teachers find themselves when teaching according to these practices. In the analysis of this author, committed constructivist teachers need to navigate crucial conceptual, pedagogical, cultural, and political questions. Examples of such questions are: what are the philosophical and theoretical roots of constructivism? What are the tools that I need to design a constructivist curriculum? How can I make students' cultural backgrounds a part of my pedagogy? How can I implement constructivism in an institution grounded in non-constructivist epistemologies such as objectivism and rationalism? Windschitl further illustrates the complexities of these dilemmas by stating that,

> [p]utting constructivism into practice requires a host of teacher skills not directly implied by idealized design principles coming out of the learning sciences research or from the broader rhetoric of reform movements. Teachers, for example, must learn to capitalize on, rather than suppress, differences in students' existing understandings due to background; they must become critically conscious of the dynamics of their own classroom culture; and they must attend to patterns of classroom discourse as well as to the thinking that goes with them (p. 160).

While I contend that part of the democratic possibilities of constructivism rest in advocating for theoretical positions within this broader term aligned to ideologies of social equality, and from attending to the array of dilemmas teachers face when implementing these positions, I would like to argue that constructivism can only become a tool for progressive changes if it is able to understand, and contest, the discursive relations of power that define its possibilities. The limited impact on education in general that some innovative constructivist 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, is testimony to the unwillingness of schools to abandon the structural and intellectual rigidity inherited from the modernist tradition. Indeed, these pockets of constructivist innovation have shown us how vulnerable schools are to the predominant social discourses outside their doors. Even in the case that constructivism could develop a committed ideological position toward social justice, and that some

schools could manage, as some have done in the past and still do in the present, to solve the dilemmas presented by Windschitl (2002), the conservative forces germane to the neoliberal society could easily render their efforts futile by justifying a rationality of social inequality. To counteract these forces, the field of education needs, in my opinion, to make a compelling call to other allied disciplines for the articulation of a serious progressive constructivist proposal and for the development of ways of sustaining it over time. This call is particularly important in a time of democratic stability like the one Spain is currently experiencing when no political or social force is expected to be the major engine of social transformation. This conversation with other disciplines such as philosophy, history, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, political science, etc. could generate the necessary knowledge to design this comprehensive and critical proposal 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 this call? 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? How do we understand ourselves, and our students, as cultural beings in a multicultural society? This conversation would be, undoubtedly, a complicated one. But it would also be, in my opinion, the only way that constructivism could become a serious democratic tool in education and could avoid the fatal trap that poststructural theory warns us about, namely, to think of schools as transformational agents while confining the breath of these changes to the realm of the individual (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984; Peters, 1996; Silva, 2001; Walkerdine, 1984).

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Revista de Educación, 356. Septiembre-diciembre 2011, pp. 83-105
Fecha de entrada: 16-02-2011   Fecha de aceptación: 06-05-2011

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