

Educational Policies and Institutional Daily Practices in Secondary School: A Study of the Case of Secondary School from Rio Negro*

Cecilia Ines Foures, Mabel Chrestia, Maria de la Trinidad Quijano
(Rio Negro National University, Andean Zone Seat, Argentina)

Abstract: The aim of this research is to analyse the relationship (approaches, semblances, differences) between educational policies set by policymakers on Secondary School (focusing on new curriculum design for Rio Negro Secondary School system), and senses and meanings given in daily practices by institutions and their actors (teachers and directors), to those orders. This research is carried out from a qualitative-interpretative perspective, and the methodology is the case study. Methodological resources used in this research process are: deep and open interviews with several institutional actors, lesson observations and official and governmental agencies files analysis. Analysis of collected data shows important points on which the new curriculum proposal is focused, such as post structure, inter and multidisciplinary work, working in learning pathways and cuatrimestralization of subjects. We make reference to important points in order to give an account of the significance reached by these aspects in the educational policies area, after considering that they will influence as a performative modification (Austin, 1962) of the traditional school format.

We believe that these points do not succeed in becoming a force for change in educational institutions but, on the contrary, become a point of complexity/critical issue in daily work at schools, manifesting as obstacles faced by teachers during their daily practices. In this tension, the complex truss of logics of significance and laws of functioning of social fields (Bourdieu, 1990) historically established takes action, with its specific institutions. A complex truss of disputes and negotiations started between the curricular field and the realization field of those policies which are schools, and inside of them, classrooms.

Key words: curricular policy, daily teaching practice, social fields.

1. Introduction

This work gives an account of the progress reached by the Research Project called “Teaching practice in vulnerable contexts: Teaching today in public schools in Bariloche”, which is focused on investigating daily teaching practices inside secondary schools in the city of San Carlos de Bariloche, in Río Negro (Argentina), in Rio Negro province (Argentina), passed through and regulated by provincial educative policies.

The aim of this research is to analyse the educational policy on secondary education formulated by provincial government agencies, focusing on the new curriculum design of Rio Negro Secondary School (Escuela

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Cecilia Ines Foures, Doctora en Ciencias de la Educación, Universidad Nacional de Rio Negro; research areas: teaching practice, general didactic and educational policies; E-mail: cfoures@unrn.edu.ar.

Secundaria de Rio Negro — ESRN), investigating the senses and meanings given by institutions and their actors (teachers and directors) to those orders (curricular design and rules and regulations). Directive questions in this work are, among others: which is the logic behind operations in the sphere of educational policies? Which is the logic behind its actions? How are rules and regulations resignified in schools by teachers and directors? How are educational policies proposals recreated in daily work at school?

We maintain the need of contextualizing daily processes in educational institutions contributing a co-constructing point of view, analyzing related different levels: macroeducational (rules and regulations of educational policies), their resignification and appropriation in mesoeducational (school) and microeducational (classrooms) levels, influenced by specific social processes.

The concept of social fields (Bourdieu, 1990) as historically established playgrounds, with specific institutions and laws of functioning, is propitious for analyzing force and power relationships developed between the curricular field and the realization field, which are schools and inside of them, classrooms.

2. Methodology

We consider that theoretical, epistemological and methodological constructions go hand in hand with the search of the complexity of the Real. It's a concrete reality of institutions the constant reference and basis of this field, because it's on them where educational policies take shape. Thus, in our analysis we look for contextualizing teacher practices in historical, social and political dimensions, which affect them and influence them.

From this methodological point of view, we are working from a qualitative viewpoint, emphasizing on anthropological perspective and ethnographic resources (Rockwell, 2009). The instruments used are observations on classrooms and in-depth interviews, as well as document quests. This ethnographic clipping about daily life inside educational institutions are compared and contrasted to theoretical definitions, which guide our analysis in a continuous reflexivity process (Rockwell, 2009; Guber, 2001). In addition, we use quantitative contributions for the treatment of some dimensions of the research. We agree with the approval of the complementarity of both qualitative and quantitative points of view, for approaching a complex reality.

Qualitative methodological resources used in this research process are open and semi-structured in-depth interviews, and lessons observations with written record. Field work was carried out in three middle-school institutions in Bariloche. Interviews were done to several institutional actors: headmasters, deputy headmasters, area coordinators and teachers. In addition, information from several meetings with Middle-School Director and some assistants was compiled, and members of the Commission on Curriculum and consultants and advisers on disciplinary didactics were interviewed. Also analysis of the national and provincial government agencies corpus about educational policies (laws, decrees, rules and regulations, curriculum designs) was conducted.

Regarding quantitative methodological resources, these refer fundamentally to the employment of instruments as researcher-administered surveys (in order to inquire into some specific themes), which were conducted at the end of the year 2016 (when the implementation of the new curriculum design was imminent) to teachers in a number of schools, which was higher than the number of schools the fieldwork focused on, in 2017.

3. Considerations about the Curriculum

The curriculum supposes a socio-political-cultural project that guides or directs a school teaching practice.

Thus, it has to do with the decisions on what must happen in the education sphere, when it includes those cultural elements — knowledge, abilities, values, among others — which are considered relevant by certain social groups and legitimate to be transmitted by educational system. However, it is necessary to incorporate curricular processes in our analysis, which include acceptance, rejection, and redefinition by those who carry out the daily task of teaching in educational institutions. Litwin (1997) proposes in the new didactic agenda, among other aspects, inquiring into real senses and meanings of curriculum model for social actors and their actions. In this direction, the role of teachers is centrally claimed as curricular agents with the ability to actively take part in defining what, how, why and what are their works and the institutions — where they work — for, as subjects who can contribute to the generation of new knowledge about teaching.

Although in applicationist approaches to curriculum, teaching content should be those stipulated in official document, where what to teach is prescribed, recent suggestions about curriculum processes emphasize that teachers do not act as executors of curriculum norms, but as performers or interpreters who select, modify, delete, reinterpret the curriculum proposal, while combining it with judgement formed by professional experience or pedagogical traditions of the institution where they work (Terigi, 1999).

4. Educational Policies: The Curriculum Proposal of Rio Negro Secondary School

Secondary education is one of the most critical aspects in current Latin American government agendas. This is evinced by the proposal “Goals for 2021: The education we want for the Bicentennials generation”, approved in 2009 by Ibero-American education ministers since a project done by the Organization of Ibero-American States (OEI) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL). This consists of a memorandum of agreement which seeks to organize the efforts with the purpose of improving the education in our region, being secondary school one of the level that concentrates the major challenges around education improvements, guaranteeing a quality education.

In the case of Argentina, secondary school is an educational level whose obligatory nature was recently imposed (National Law on Education n. 26206, from year 2006), increasing its coverage since educational policies which sought inclusion as a goal.

Going round the critical points of Secondary Level Education during the last decades, we can see the deficiency condition in provincial school administrations which was worsened since 1992 (Educational Transfer Law 24.049/92), with the education services being transferred from national level to provincial level, but without the necessary budget for its support and maintenance.

In the case of Río Negro, according to official data of the last years, repeating and dropout standards registered in secondary school did not show any substantial improvements. Within the framework of this diagnostic made by provincial administration, in 2015 the Curricular Jurisdictional Commission (Comisión Jurisdiccional Curricular) was created to work on the production of the Curriculum Design for the “New School” (thus called by provincial education administration), attending to the National Education Law. Previously, in 2012 the provincial government had passed the Organic Law of Education n° 4819.

One the main purposes of the new design is “To consider school as a practice of denaturalizing conceptions which are settled in discourses, the school mechanism, in the ways of time and space organization, in the way students are looked upon”. Thus, among the questionable features of the “traditional” secondary school organization, the new design mentions: “graded structure, ‘classic’ periodization, same groupings, curriculum

organized with dissimilar intentions of overcoming the disconnected disciplines/subjects which leave “life” outside, teachers appointed according to their “disciplinary specificity” and under an administrative procedure that infringes upon labor conditions (grid), with a time organization that most of the times does not allow interaction between fields of knowledge, traditional teaching formats, normative examinations about the results, which at the same time are averageable, workspaces that do not always achieve a production of institutional and pedagogical — didactical knowledge” (Diseno curricular Escuela Secundaria, Ministerio de Educacion y Derechos Humanos Rio Negro, 2017).

The new Curriculum Design for Rio Negro New Secondary School, came into effect from March, 2017, in 58 of the 93 public middle-schools (CEM, Centro de Educación Media) in the province. Technical and private schools did not join to the reforms, and some towns (Cipolletti, Lamarque, Darwin, entre otras) joined later. Schools where the reforms were implemented changed their name from Middle Education Centers (CEM, Centros de Educacion Media) to Rio Negro Secondary School (ESRN, Escuela Secundaria de Rio Negro).

The new school is organized into two levels: a Basic Level (CB, Ciclo Basico) of two years common to all schools, and an orientation level (CO, Ciclo Orientado) of three years diversified in character according to the different fields of knowledge, social and work world, local and provincial reality, and regional demands.

Every level is organized into seven Areas of Knowledge: Mathematical Education; Language and Literature Education; Social Sciences and Humanistic Studies; Scientifical and Technological Education; Second Languages; Artistic Education, and Physical Education. At the same time, every area includes different subjects and workshops.

New subjects such as Theater, Social Sciences and Visual Arts are included in Basic Level; apart from several workshops such as Scientific Research Workshops, Economics and Society Workshop, Political and Civic Education Workshop, and Artistic Languages Workshops. Interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and disciplinary interaction workshops were also included, and subjects from the former design are kept, such as History, Biology, and Geography.

In the case of Bariloche, this new curricular design was implemented in fifteen schools. Most of them also modified its orientation. Thus former orientations were kept, such as Turism and Musical Art, and new ones were included such as Audiovisual Art, Social and Human Studies, Physical Education, Language, Physical and Mathematical Sciences.

The academic year is divided into two quadrimesters; work duration in the class is measured in clock hours. Academic year curricular formats, course modality, and examination, accreditation and promotion modes, seek a response to the school learning in an attempt to favor the entry, re-entry, presence, continuation and finalization of students academic career.

Regarding teacher posts, there are three possibilities: 9, 16 and 25 weekly hours. Every one of them, specially the last one, has available hours inside the institution, to cover possible absences of other teachers all along the academic year. This would allow to eliminate free periods for pupils, thus helping to keep the school study rhythm.

In our data analysis we will mark some crucial points on which the new curriculum proposal focuses. We refer to crucial points to give an account on the significance these aspects assume in the educational policies field, after considering that these aspects (structure of posts, inter and multidisciplinary work) are central and its effective implementation would influence on other aspects of practices in institutions.

5. Implementacion of the Proposal

From the beginning the implementation of the ESRN design faced fierce resistance among teachers' labour unions: Union de Trabajadores de la Educacion de Rio Negro (UnTER). This was part of the Curricular Jurisdictional Commission (Comision Jurisdiccional Curricular) until the middle of 2016, when the union started to criticize the new design, focusing critics on the substantial changes it presented, which had not been worked or debated over properly with teachers and inside educational institutions (working on debates between students, workers and educational communities). So, in the beginning of 2017, UnTER tried to stop the assignment of posts by setting up Assemblies. So Middle School Level Direction started to provide alternative mechanisms for inscription to posts, such as online inscription, which created havoc and discontent among teachers.

Despite this situation, authorities continued to implement the new design. This generated one of the main critiques released by interviewed directors and teachers: its compulsive implementation. Although several teachers expressed disagreement with the actions taken by the labour union, a vast majority pointed out that they were not given enough time for discussion and debate about the ESRN design, in terms of appropriation and resignificance in educational institutions.

Enquiries (in due time and proper form) which would allow teachers to have a leading role in the new design, were not carried out. Furthermore, strategies adopted by the Education Ministry and the Middle School Level Direction are restricted to "classic" training regarding specific topics (for example, Evaluation) where teachers do not feel that their quotidian demands are heard.

We consider ourselves to be part of the scope of political decisions operating in a logic that responds, in a great sense, to what Terigi (1999) calls "aplicationist logic" of the curriculum, in which there is a vision of teachers as technicians who only execute decisions taken by others who thus assume positions of authority. Positions linked to forms of international division of labour, which assign a central role in idea generation, regarding education, supported by conceptions of reforms carried out from above to below, which limit teachers to a passive role of mere executors.

We are thus facing a dominant way of understanding educational policies, which identifies the problems of planning with the definition of big purposes, the making of rules and regulations, and the setting up of a organizational structure. This paradigm ignores and is out of touch with the way teaching will be finally carried out. "Politics in a macro level are planned as if pedagogical definitions taken in this level could be independent from the pedagogical definitions that will be taken in those levels which are closer to teaching" (Terigi, 2004, p. 194).

In schools, institutional actors point out that during the implementation of the ESRN proposal, crucial points became key problems owing to the fact that they manifest as obstacles faced by teachers during their daily practices. In this sense, the organization of teaching posts is pointed out as a problem, as teachers who work for 25 or 16 hours cannot apply for another post in the same shift. This creates an important amount of free spaces which are left unfilled due to teachers' shortage. For this same reason, vacants produced by sick leaves cannot be filled. This demand is met by professionals without teacher training, primary school teachers, undergraduated students or people considered suitable for the post. Facing this situation, directors' central concern is managing to fill all those free spaces, before thinking about how to boost the implementation of the proposal beneficially:

"Who can fill those hours without lessons? Because when a teacher gets a sick leave, filling that empty space is very complicated: the Assembly does not take those hours. In my administrative point of view, it's a

headache” (ESRN Director).

“It’s not the same having a lesson of 40 or 80 minutes than working 3-hours blocks. If you hold a 25 hours post, you need a person to take the whole block and that is not taking place, those posts are not taken up in assemblies. A person with 25 or 16 hours in the morning or in the afternoon cannot work in any other thing, and that restricts the amount of people. With a 9 hours post, theory dictates that you could hold two posts in the same shift and we see that, in practice it is unrealistic” (ESRN Director).

Inter and multidisciplinary work, is pointed out as positive by teachers. All of them agree that working in the classroom with other teachers is a correct aspect of the new design. However, they note that not having the necessary time to plan lessons as a group, is a problem, as they cannot make a work effective aiming this sense. In school organization, a teacher can be part of several workshops and has to work in every one of them with different teachers, but has only 2 credit hours per week for planning. This a new activity for teachers that makes their duties more complex, as they previously worked only on their subject:

“...I’m working on 4 workshops with 4 different teachers and I don’t have any available hours, as my post is for 16 hours. All my work hours are in front of a class. I plan 2 of the workshops and the other teacher expresses his point of view about it by E-mail, but we cannot gather to plan them together. I work with two geography teachers, a biology teacher and a philosophy teacher. The spaces are a good idea, but we need more time to plan them...” (ESRN Teacher).

We ask ourselves: How to break the disciplinary structure - purpose expected by educational policies — if the necessary conditions for achieving it, are not provided?

Regarding school careers, these are defined as:

“...the several paths, in educational experience, in which students build and appropriate equivalent knowledge from a corpus of knowledge (...) Secondary school will deal with not only students psycho-socio-familiar situations but also with the fact that every student has gone through his own training career, which must be considered when proposing teaching situations for building knowledge, suggesting and displaying alternatives for enabling learning. From that point on, school will accompany and support students’ career” (ESRN Academic System Rules, ESRN Regimen Academico, 2017, p. 6).

Thus, within the scope of educational policies, accompanying of every student school career is expected, by contemplating different ways of going through secondary school. Although from the theoretical and discursive aspect teachers agree with the proposal, interviews conducted to teachers showed that its effective implementation creates a great uncertainty, as it is not clear how the work about careers will be carried out and made effective, given the conditions of the proposal implementation and with groups of more than 20 pupils. The work proposal attending to the rhythm heterogeneity in the group is considered very accurate but not much implementable with large groups (25/30 pupils): “The path is good from a theoretical point of view, but it’s quiet complicated, going to every pupil’s rhythm is very difficult with too many pupils, we teachers get lost” (ESRN Teacher).

Directors and teachers point out that, apart from problems that we could term as structural in public educational institutions (especially those attended by vulnerable groups), such as familiar and social problems (early adult responsibilities, underemployment, unemployment, among others), there are other relevant problems emerging from the new proposal as: filling posts and sick leaves in the institutions, an effective realization of the paths, inter and multidisciplinary work”.

6. First Analytical Interpretations

When approaching daily practices in the studied educational institutions, we have been able to survey the complex structural framework of disputes and negotiations established between the curricular scope and the scope of realization of those policies. When we refer to the concept of social fields (Bourdieu, 1990), we make reference to the play area historically constituted with their specific institutions and their own operating rules, taking into account a set of complex force relationships established between agents or institutions.

Thus, we found a position in which the crucial points would be considered by curricular policy as performative¹ (Austin, 1962) after showing a logic where the provisions of the New ESRN Design would constitute the necessary force for guaranteeing an action: modification of daily practices inside educational institutions. We are attending a conception where what is prescribed would be established after its definition in the field of design. From our analysis, this is evinced in the unawareness of institutional and work times to tackle a joint planning by teachers, which would close the possibility of generating the necessary processes for appropriating the new proposal.

So, this points do not achieve to gain the strength to become a force of change in educational institutions but, on the contrary, they become key problems in daily work at schools, showing themselves as obstacles faced by teacher in their daily practices.

A problem of didactical accessibility (Terigi, 2004) is shown up in the implementation of the ESRN. We are making reference to the degree to which the educational policy measures are made accessible to teachers, according to their real possibilities and their didactical knowledge. Bearing in mind that the new orders from the scope of educational policies considering the didactical accessibility, implies suggesting an “adequate imbalance” in relation to the new proposals and the effective abilities of teachers to be able to carry them out.

Thus, being able to start a dialog between macro, meso and micro educative levels is an essential point, because teachers, as knowledge producers about their own practice, need to be heard about they consider the new proposal.

7. Final Considerations

In this first analytical insight, we seek an approach to the relationships between educational policies in the framework of the Rio Negro Secondary School (ESRN) design and the practices inside those schools which are carrying out that proposal. We seek to focus on the senses and meanings given by institutions actors (directors and teachers), in their daily practices, to curricular prescriptions.

The relationships built until now evince tensions, approaches and distances that we need to continue researching on their next steps to be able to go in depth into this problem.

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¹ According to Austin (1962), performative acts make reference to the ability of some expressions to become actions and transforming reality or the environment.

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