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Educational Research in Latin America: A Response to Akkary and Pérez

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Abstract In a recent article which appeared in *Educational Policy Analysis Archives 6 (7) 1998*, "[Educational Research in Latin America: Review and Perspectives](#)," [Abdeljalil Akkari and Soledad Pérez](#) envisage carrying out a general analysis of the situation of educational research in Latin America, in an attempt to describe the context of its historical formation. They focus on the main theoretical framework, they identify the principal institutions involved in educational research, and consider the priorities for future research in the region.

This article does not claim to provide a global reply to the work presented, although it does hope to elaborate upon certain aspects, to clear up matters which are presented in an over-simplified manner, and to extend the analysis in order to capture the intricacies of the problem in all its complexity. The *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, considered one of the top level journals, is consulted by a wide range of international readers who often possess only superficial knowledge of educational research in Latin America

Defining "Latin America"

The work of [Abdeljalil Akkari and Soledad Pérez](#) attempts to analyze the development of educational research in Latin America. In the article, the authors seem to

take for granted a sort of homogeneity among Latin American countries. The conclusions they reach never specify differences or contrasts which exist among these countries: the article creates a Latin American panorama without bothering with factors specific to each country, and even takes for granted the existence of some sort of "identity" as regards educational research.

In our opinion, this analysis deserves a more rigorous approach. That which is usually termed "Latin America" includes more than twenty independent nations which, despite sharing many common characteristics, display many varying features. Among these are: different languages (Spanish, Portuguese, as well as another several dozen existing languages of the native indians), differences in terms of systems of government (for example, presidential systems in Argentina and Mexico; a semi-presidential system in Brazil; "socialist democracy" in Cuba, etc.); ethnic, immigrant, political, economic, cultural, and even territorial differences. One must bear in mind the war-like confrontations between Argentina and Chile; Colombia and Venezuela; or the latest one between Peru and Ecuador, only to mention those which are most recent. Within the limits of this article, it would certainly be impossible to cover each and every one of the similarities and differences which exist among Latin American nations.

From the educational, academic, or scientific point of view, there are still more differences, and the supposition of an identity of processes calls for closer examination. There are countries with universities which have existed for more than four hundred years, while others have only recently established universities. There are countries where some investigators have been awarded Nobel Prizes in science. There are countries where the growth in the indices of basic schooling are similar to those of the most highly developed European countries, while in some others, the indices are the lowest in the world.

One could take as an example the Latin American countries from Central America, where the situation would appear to be homogeneous. Nevertheless, certain studies have shown the differences which exist in university development between Costa Rica and the rest of the Central American countries in terms of the different dimensions of academic activity (Levenberg, 1995). Disparities have also been found among Caribbean nations, some of which are not "latin" (Dachary and Burne, 1995).

As regards science and higher education, the situations are very heterogeneous. According to data from the World Bank, between 1992 and 1995, in comparison with Korea, Argentina produced more than twice the number of publications in international scientific journals. As for Mexico, during the same period the amount it produced was similar to that of Argentina, but both of them produced half the number of papers from Brazil and only 1% of those from the United States. One further piece of data substantiates the diversity of the experiences: Latin American countries such as Paraguay, Guatemala, and Honduras can barely sustain research programs, and their presence in the international context is minimal (Almada, 1979). In the words of Garcia Guadilla (1998: pp. 432-433), and in reference to research investigation on higher education:

"Although a small group of countries has achieved initial institutionalization, the rest of the countries still lack the basics needed to develop this area as a field of study, due to a limited production of research as well as to the nonexistence of research centers and/or specific training to develop autonomously in this area of knowledge

These examples are not directed at refuting the possibility of the existence of a single identity as regards Latin American educational research, but to advance in the idea that that single identity should be more the result of the evidence of an investigation and less an assumption providing a starting point for further work. In fact, in other works we have emphasized the need for the development of comparative studies in Latin American educational research which allow for the recognition of both the national peculiarities and the regional identities (Martinez Boom and Narodowski, 1998).

In the Akkari and Pérez study, the lack of a more thorough investigation of these peculiarities results in the analysis of common processes. The case of Mexico is a perfect example of this as in the article it is mentioned only once and there, to name a non-governmental organization dedicated to educational research. The article neglects the work carried out in prestigious and traditional institutions dedicated directly or indirectly to educational research such as the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, the Colegio de México, or the Departamento de Investigaciones Educativas of the Instituto Politécnico Nacional. This omission is not irrelevant considering that Mexico is the Latin American country with the greatest proportion of investigators carrying out their activities in public institutions.

This lack of specification and its hurried generalization produce results which are equally partial and, to say the least, questionable. The analysis of the situation of educational research in Latin America calls for the development of local studies and comparative examination which has barely begun. Obviously, this response hopes to begin to complete the work of Akkari and Pérez and not to substitute it but rather to point out, schematically, certain areas which require deeper examination.

History and Theoretical Structures

There are no studies which analyze the history of educational research in Latin America in a global and detailed manner. Despite this, we can point out that diverse experiments in educational research began around the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth and did not merely begin in the decade of the thirties. Furthermore, Argentina was able to achieve a level of excellence in its investigators in education when, in 1914, the University of La Plata created the Laboratory of Experimental Pedagogy (Dabat, 1992). In Brazil, the first study of the history of education, of Pires de Almeyda, was published in 1889. Therefore, sufficient evidence does not appear to exist which would affirm that in the region, educational research "...most research has primarily been descriptive rather than empirical or applied." In fact, in Latin American academic institutions, a tradition still exists which recognizes research only if it is of an empirical or even experimental nature. In Mexico, the implementation of courses for the masters and doctors degrees in the University of Mexico in 1955, indicated a clear emphasis upon the training of investigators in education with specific stimulus towards empirical projects. (Ducoing, 1990).

The reactions provoked by this tradition would appear to be proof of the importance of applied and experimental research in Latin America. Towards the end of the 1920's, the educational philosopher, Juan Manovani, in a journalistic interview, complained of the excess of experimentalism in educational research, criticizing psychology and experimental didactics and what he termed "the reign of the method". (Carli, 1955).

On the other hand, in several countries, Colombia, Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina, starting in the 1930's, the development of the educational system generated great challenges in educational research, especially the trend towards didactic methods and

active or radicalized positions in psychology which resulted in a high number of Latin American participants in the Ligue Internationale de l'Ecole Nouvelle and their active participation in international discussions which took place there. This urgency to improve educational practices generated a tendency towards research applied to teaching methods, as in the case of the Instituto de Investigaciones Educativas (in Brazil), under the direction of Anixio Texeira, a pedagogue who was able to combine political management with research and teaching (Gonçalves Vidal, 1996).

This rich and heterogeneous history prevents a quick categorization of the principal theoretical structures or of those which have played a more important role in educational research. It is true that the three theoretical tendencies pointed out in the paper of Akkari and Pérez were and are notably relevant: the one created by the ECLAC, the so-called Theory of Dependence, and the pedagogy of Paulo Freire. However, several relevant theoretical positions have maintained and/or currently maintain a central position in the Latin American academic debate and must not be discarded.

Establishing significant theoretical tendencies implies in the first place carrying out the detailed job of collecting and checking all the Latin American publications related to educational research, a task which has barely begun and presents many difficulties. For example, a study was recently published which provided a list of existing studies on the Argentine educational system from within the period 1976-1994 (Feldfeberg, 1995). This work, of unquestionable bibliographical value, lists 284 published studies. Moreover, it leaves out the educational research of the rest of the countries and even Argentine educational research itself dedicated to other subjects, besides the obvious (and perhaps unavoidable) omissions of the study. A quick perusal of the listed studies shows that a categorization of all these works greatly exceeds the theoretical inclinations suggested by Akkari and Pérez, and one could even affirm that none of these 284 could be placed within the tradition founded by Paulo Freire, one of the theories considered of great importance by Akkari and Pérez.

Something similar occurs with the annual meetings of the Associação Nacional de Pesquisa e Pós-graduação em Educação (ANPED and not ANPE as it appears in the Akkari and Pérez article). There alone, hundreds and hundreds of papers are presented by the participants. To determine the principal theoretical trends, the shades, and the ideological slant of the investigations calls for research which has only just been begun by Aedo-Richmond (1996)

For this reason, great features of theoretical structures of importance in Latin American educational research will now be presented which are or have been part of its development. Due to the circumstances described, the aim is not to deal with the totality of the tendencies but only to contribute to the completion, although if only partially, of an extensive, heterogeneous panorama.

In the field of sociology of education, the functionalist and structural-functional positions have generated numerous studies which provide empirical evidence about different aspects which are relative to the schooling process. Some of these studies have been influenced by the works of CEPAL while others have maintained an orthodox point of view (Tedesco, 1987). The Marxist and reproductivist points of view, influenced as much by Latin American Marxism as by the Althusserian critical trends, reached their peak between the 1970's and the beginning of the 1980's (Labarca and others, 1977; Vasconi, 1988).

Theoretical and methodological ruptures have been occurring in this field for more than three decades. As regards the theoretical side, we should point out the current popularity of multicultural studies and of those focused on categories such as gender, ethnicity, or class. It is impossible to name all the authors who adhere to this position. It

is worthwhile mentioning, as an illustration, a recent book edited in Brazil comprising original work of European, North American, and Latin American authors working along this line of research (da Silva, 1998). The exclusion of this tendency is misleading considering that this tends to cause one to think that in the 1990's in Latin America, post-structuralist discourse prevails in most of the educational research.

Also of great importance are the studies undertaken by several groups which base their research on the contributions of M. Foucault. In Colombia, an inter-university group developed which has produced books and papers from this perspective (Diaz Villa, 1993). These contributions, and the theoretical tools of "critical pedagogy" have also been utilized in the curriculum field, as can be seen in numerous studies produced in several countries - especially in Mexico (Diaz, 1989).

From the methodological point of view, modern positions such as the ethnographic approach attempted by many investigations, particularly in Mexico and Chile are worth pointing out. Both the empirical studies as well as the epistemological proposals about the utilization of ethnology in educational research arising in this area are very well known. The so-called participatory research must also be mentioned (Rockwell, 1991).

A fundamental chapter in the present theories which have the most influence upon educational research is given by the constructivist theory, based on the work of Jean Piaget in the field of educational psychology and didactics. The investigations of E. Ferreiro and A. Teberosky have been the center of a huge debate and have been published in books and re-edited many times. They constitute one of the theoretical positions most akin to the daily reality of teachers. The Brazilian journal *Educação & Realidade* has devoted several issues to the debate around constructivism, its epistemological foundations, the evidence that it produces in research, and its consequences in educational practice. In addition, one should not discard the importance of many research groups dedicated to cognitive psychology applied to education.

Educational research in the field of the history of education has been one of the most productive types of investigation in the last decades. Especially in the 1990s, journals and scientific societies dedicated to this field of study have appeared, and four international congresses on Latin American Educational Historiography have taken place. Some authors already propose a positive balance of this experience (Sanchez Gamboa, 1996) although it would not appear easy to reach generalized theoretical conclusions in meetings where more than four hundred papers are presented. As is asserted by Tellez (1996, p. 10), one cannot aspire to a unity of points of view but at best to generate "a map which allows us to create a view both of the diversity of matters which occupy the investigators' attention...and of the keys of research which are involved."

In several Latin American countries, a very important field of research exists which has to do with the relationship between the State and education (Torres and Puiggrós, 1995). It is probable that works on the politics, administration, financing and economics of education are those where it is the easiest to detect theoretical influences and where these are the easiest to generalize. Studies generated by governmental, inter-governmental, and international organisms have given a definite slant to educational research to such a degree that in another study we have proposed the existence of a sort of "State pedagogue" in Latin American countries (Narodowski, 1997). However, it is not easy to determine the theoretical contents of the positions presented, especially at the time when divergences or peculiarities between apparently congruent theoretical positions are detected.

To sum up, this examination of Latin American educational research reveals a

large amount of divergent studies and diverse theoretical and methodological positions, where a proliferation of metatheoretical studies can be observed. Furthermore, this review shows that the theoretical tendencies which dominate in the different stages of the development of educational research are the same as those which predominate in Europe or the United States.

If we set aside the analysis of the periods when the Latin American investigators had limited freedom due to the presence of military dictatorships (which in the last ten years have not played a role in almost any of the countries of the region) (Braslavsky, 1991), we can assert that the principal theoretical tendencies appear in the different geographical areas. This situation appears to have been accentuated in the last decade thanks to the popularization and reduction in cost of technology for the transmission of information such as Internet.

Obviously, it remains to be investigated whether the characteristics and use of these theories have a particular bias which constitutes some sort of single identity in all of Latin America or in some of its countries

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