Why re-thinking the discourse of quality in education?
Politics and educational policies as a perspective[1]

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> In Sierra Leone, guerrilla men cut the right hand of the inhabitants of a village before withdrawing. A girl, happy as she has learnt how to write, asks them to cut her left hand to continue writing. As an answer, the guerrilla man cuts the two hands of hers. José Antonio Marinas and María de la Válgoma, 2008, (The Fight for Dignity).

Introito

Valparaíso you are a colourful rainbow are the salty and peaceful words of the music that opens the Third Virtual International Congress in Educational Research and Innovation. Located in southern Pacific, the multiple colours of Valparaiso pay homage to diversity calling for politics. Multiple challenges coming from the triad of locality, internationality and virtuality are possible to be tackled from here: recovery of *dictum urbi et orbi* to communicate and to do community.

The virtual space proposes a challenge: technological artefact, constituted by two seemingly contradictory concepts, the real and the virtual. Maybe, this was an invention to fulfil the mythical syndrome of Alice through the looking glass, penetrating in an alternative reality which apparently contains all the attributes of the true and objective reality" (Gubern, 2003, p. 155). In this virtual space, particularly, the fight for dignity could become a must for educational research and innovation.

Could this virtual space be an opportunity for politics? Understanding lectures as a contribution and communication, as the case of this Congress is, is a sign of cooperation towards an end, or of cooperation with others towards an end. This is an otherness exercise; what politics is all about.

Scientific research is our habitat, that of being committed to the kind of knowledge that is reinforced upon the construction of a better society and the fight for dignity. This research is developed in a regional, Chilean, Latin American, public space, Universidad de Playa Ancha, particularly, the Centre of Advanced Studies; the cradle of our Educational Politics Laboratory. The research underlying this lecture is financed by the Scientific and Technological Research Fund of Chile (Fondecyt, Spanish Acronym), one of the most important instruments for the scientific and technological development in Chile. I want to thank them all, as well as those who

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have accompanied me in this endeavour; and to the organizers who have trusted my voice, be my special recognition.

Why re-thinking the discourse of quality in education? The hegemonic discourse of quality in education, based on *sciencia*, has corroded education significantly due to the impact produced by the technical-instrumental rationality and the Human Capital theory on the discourse of quality in education. Within this context, denouncing this discourse and reviving the discourse of quality in education for education becomes and obligation.

The political perspective opens three basic cases to be explored: (i) Politics, the place of utterance; (ii) the dominant discourse of quality of education based on measurement, and (iii) re-thinking quality in education from education.

I Politics, the place of utterance

What is the link between thinking and re-thinking? The prefix "re" leads us to the idea of recovery, reestablishment, renewal, return, restitution (Monlau, 1943). All this becomes the underpinning of our thesis of re-thinking the dominant discourse of quality in education. Thinking, on its own, takes us to distinguishing, grasping the specificity of the concepts and experiences which are, themselves, their own roots; understanding is the exercise of going deep and becoming rooted in the common world; and it is also the fact of adopting a standpoint (Arendt, in Fuster, 2013).

What is the experience that implies the specificity of the idea of measuring inserted in the semantic ground of quality in education? This justifies the fact that politics has a place in the utterance of this conference, in which thinking and politics become tied to one another. On the other hand, it also sends an alert against pseudo politics and trivialization of politics, always willing to untie this link, having awful consequences for education. Upon this point, it not possible to avoid the following question: Which politics? There are varied and variable possibilities that would allow activating the thinking which goes for the tradition of political philosophy and the "*Thinker of the Century*" (Cruz, 1993), Hannah Arendt, a sharp observer of the mishaps of her time. The unease of asking, Does politics still make any sense? is, in itself, a means to represent the sense of politics as a habitat for life in common.

What is the space of utterance asking from politics? Precisely, it asks clues allowing the formulation of questions to re-think the discourse of quality in education and acting consequently; that is, moving away from measuring. Arendt (1997) states that politics is an unavoidable need for human life: man is not an autarchic entity. Man depends on others. Life in common and the constitution of a community is the master key of politics, a sort of a spiral in which all infinite gyri of it go back to the most essential human sense. Plurality is the underside of community, those who are present in the common world have different places, and "being listened to and being seen by others becomes meaningful from the fact that everybody listens and sees from a different position (Arendt, 2016, 66).

Along this road of living together, the idea of the public condition germinates. The genesis of it is found in the Greek world when discovering that our existence is developed in two fields: the first one is owned privately; it is the sphere of need, and the second

one is commonly owned, it is the sphere of freedom, or public sphere. Thus, the public sphere is tied to the common sphere. This is the architecture of commonality and its meaning is given by two related phenomena: everything appearing in public can be seen and listened to by everybody and offers the widest publicity possible (…). And the term "public" means the world of your own, as it is common to all of us and different from the world privately owned inside it (Arendt, 2016).

Politics as a place of utterance encloses another basic element relative to democracy: the statutory regime, where the public sphere becomes real and effectively public; it belongs to everybody and is open to the participation of all, Castoriadis states (1995).

II The dominant discourse of quality in education based on measuring

A sketch of the idea of discourse allows entering into the sense and meaning of a dominant discourse which is actualised in the science and measurement matrix based architecture.

"All educational system is a way of keeping or modifying the adaptation of discourses, with all knowledge and power implied", Foucault (2005), as of the order of discourse. Which order are we referring to? How does it order?, What is put into order? What does it put things in order for? and eventually, What is finally put into order?

The idea of order appears as linked to the matrix, a place where a life germinates; in this case, where a discourse germinates. Which aspects are resorted to this end? The main one is *sciencia* and measurement. This is the backbone of the dominant discourse of quality in education, which has an impact by transforming education into an applied science, and the consequent configuration of a technical - instrumental rationality. It is also linked to the Human Capital theories, as they link the notions of quality and education. So let us retake the underlying question: What is a discourse? What is the order of a discourse? Discourses are ways of dominating, putting order on things, organising and, in turn, legitimizing. Indeed, institutions keep the validity of their discourses as they are an order upon which the field of experience and knowledge are circumscribed (Foucault, 1999).

Quality in the educational discourse allows the power-state analysis, present in the discourse, as well as the tension between the dominant discourse (instituted) and the alternative or opposing discourse (instituting). The dominant discourse is rooted – constituted – in a system of beliefs, reference frameworks, and objectivised and dominant narratives to standardize; that is, put an order, homogenize, subdue to a system of dominant beliefs, through non coercive ways. These are the discourse that are kept and reproduced in the institutions (González–Ramella, 2003). Here, we find another master key for our thesis: the dominant discourse is there because there is an opposing (instituting) discourse opening its own way to become institutionalized. It is in this relationship between the different discourses where the individual finds the possibility if emancipation.

The link between quality and education dates back to the 50's, where the Human Capital theory binds the notions of quality and education together. The economical function - and the concept of efficiency - is introduced in the notion of quality (Beltrán, 2000). Within this context, knowledge and labour qualifications can be associated to the idea of capital; a key productive resource to generate products (wealth), which is the outcome of the investment done on people and the society (Schultz, 1961). The economical function lies on

the semantic core of quality, achievements and outcomes, and it is measured, upon notions of efficacy, efficiency, and accountability (Cassasus, 2010). Quality is measured based on how the systems work as it tends to be maximized by this rationality (Blaug, 1969). Quality is judged upon production, products and producers, leading to a definition of factors, standards (quality indicators) and productivity functions. Quality, then, relies on measurement (Beltrán, 2000).

Measuring is the main device of the matrix containing quality and education. Quality is shacked to the hypothetical-deductive science, to measuring and to the standardization phenomenon which is functional and subject to a technical - instrumental rationality whose aim is to adapt the educational institutions to the entrepreneurial model (Oliva, 2017).

In the scientific-like configuration, measuring naturalises nature; it sets up a natural, causal and deterministic order. This order stems from natural sciences, and behaves as a dominant discourse in social, and school, institutions. Suffice it to resort to the classic science setup in order to observe how science is expanded and mathematises the historical - social world still not determined, still not causal, and still not natural. This mere fact should trigger a voice of alert over the constraints of measuring in education, as the intrinsic content and quality values are dependent on the measurement quality (Nef and Oliva, 2011).

Nevertheless, the important role of science for culture development should still be recognized. The stress between good and pervert science relies on the ethics underpinning the way it is used, which demands us to be located, at least, in the essence of each discipline and the disciplinary tradition of it to safeguard a basic matter of validity.

III Notes to re-think quality in education from education

Several are the possibilities to revive the discourse of education from education: force a dominant discourse to be overridden by the alternative or opposing one. Two supporting points are to be considered in this document: recovering education as a socialising process, and repairing the right to education.

Education as a socialising process means reproduction, translation and transformation of culture into educational systems. Education is the expression of a socialisation process: production of the individual and reproduction of society. The educational institution, as a social institution, responds to two seemingly contradictory functions: reproduction and change. Therefore, basic functions relative to global social systems are to be kept (reproduction), whilst favouring the conditions for the system to be renewed and, if required, transform it (resistance, opposition, change). The tension between translation, reproduction and production guarantees the historical presence of any institution in different contexts and times having different characteristics and models (Granados, 2003). To summarise, the socio-cultural role of education, as a socialising process, is mainly that of social reproduction; self-recreation is sought by the society itself. Besides, the instituting capacity emerges as a challenge encouraging its own transformational power: social reproduction and production, two clues for the socio - historical configuration of education.

Dignity, on the other hand, is the source of all rights and the pillar of indivisibility of the set of categories of human rights (Habermas, 2010). Attention should be paid to the evolution of the right to education, from the universal access to school guaranteed, compulsory schooling, and schooling certification, to the right to quality education, considering learning achievements and educational quality; Teachers and educational quality; school climate and the relationship to educational quality; and finally, education for citizenship and educational quality. The latter, places quality in education at the focal point of the right to education and drives the right to education to the right of a quality education considering three dimensions: Right to schooling (access, promotion, completion of the basic school cycles); right to learning (socially important and in agreement to every one's capabilities); and right to a decent treatment and equal opportunities. How is quality linked to the right to education, here? Could the right to quality education be a sign of an alternative discourse for quality in education present in the discussion?

The political perspective has allowed considering basic aspects to re-think the discourse of quality in education, as it shows the borders between a dominant discourse, based on measuring, and the possibilities of an alternative discourse, based on education as a socialising process and on the right to education. It is a political thinking and action exercise where a "good part of our ways of life's dignity is at stake as of rejection, questioning and transformation of what has been established as the normal order of things" (Jódar, 2007). Finally, it is a fight for dignity in education, recovering a utopia, the possibility that the virtual space becomes a real place for politics.

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