In Search of an Intellectual Teacher

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Resumen

En este artículo defendemos la necesidad de disponer de un profesor culto en los procesos pedagógicos que le atañen con el fin de asumir personalmente las ideas que vertebran los cambios educativos. Se expone qué entendemos por un profesor intelectual y las estrategias didácticas para conseguirlo, así como las exigencias actuales de la ciencia moderna que deben adornar al profesor actual.

Keywords: Profesor intelectual, intelectualidad, el profesor y la ciencia moderna

Summary

In this article we defend the need to have intellectual, cultivated teachers involved in the pedagogical processes that concern them, so that they can personally assume the ideas forming the backbone of educational changes. Here we describe what we mean by the expression "intellectual teacher" and the didactic strategies for achieving that state, as well as the current demands of modern science that teachers today must meet.

Keywords: Intellectual teacher, intellectual, teacher and modern science

1. Introduction

We begin this work by highlighting the great disappointment displayed by Professor Gimeno Sacristán (1996) in his brave admission—having trumpeted the virtues of the teacher-researcher to the world before then accepting the failure of this figure—of the need to demand a teacher who is learned in pedagogical processes and knowledgeable about cultural problems. In his understanding, moreover, there cannot be change without a personal acceptance of the ideas that underpin it. As we understand it, such issues cannot be addressed if no need is generated through producing an educator who is not merely learned in educational issues, but who is so in a comprehensive manner that covers all human formative dimensions, and, above all, with the moral rooting that educating involves, entails and means.

Our introduction to this article is based on a fundamental principle, namely our understanding that culture is the basis of most human potentialities. The philosophy of this work therefore revolves around culture and intellectuality. It highlights the potentialities that have a bearing on teachers on a professional level, and without which they would be doomed to failure in the field of education.

2. The teacher as an intellectual

It is worth emphasizing the teacher as an intellectual by making reference to an actual description of a professional situation experienced by us, which is none other than that of the teacher who, after lunch and while returning to the school, always found something on the street or field, some object or something discarded on which to base the first half hour of class: a stone, a can, a branch or a box.

These objects were turned into the basis for a whole interdisciplinary session that offered the chance to talk about and discuss geology, biology, hygiene, health, economics or social issues. Ultimately, such a teacher—and there have been and there are many teachers like the one we are referring to—was an intelligent, creative, learned, enlightened, intuitive, erudite, imaginative and even ingenious educator, to whom we could ascribe that equally often-used and vulgar current expression: she knew what the profession was about, she knew what education is, and what she needed to do . What we have here, then—and it is difficult to find sufficient counterarguments to dispute it, and much less to deny it—is a learned, intellectual teacher; an enlightened teacher; quite possibly, the teacher that all students want; loved, respected and socially admired. Or, possibly, what we would understand in current pedagogical terms as a reflective and inquisitive teacher who is open to change.

In this sense, it is true that the history of education records that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, attempts were made to experiment in school (Lay, 1928, 1931), just as was the case later with the transforming practices of the postwar regenerationists (Corey, 1953; Taba and Noel, 1957), and then later with the doctrine of the reflective professional and the action research movement (Elliot, 1990), with a philosophy focused on systematic innovation ultimately being generated. We must not forget, furthermore, the approach of research processes, or the power of the appreciative inquiry, as a practical guide for positive change identified by Withney and Trosten-Bloom (2003). Can anyone doubt that the teacher we refer to carried out experiments or transforming practices in the school? Or that she was a reflective teacher who innovated and triggered a research process in the classroom? And she did all of this long before the current pedagogical literature came to endorse her as, presumably, a good and reflective educator.

The second reference point is a lovely book entitled The School as a Center of Inquiry, by Robert J. Schaefer, former dean of Teachers College at Columbia University, which appeared prior to the paradigmatic emergence of critical and interpretive models related to educational research and the teacher. This work skilfully set out a new way of conceiving of the school and the classroom as a centre and place of research, as well as a new configuration in the function and role of the teacher. We have drawn on its brilliant ideas throughout this work.

2.1. The educator as an intellectual

But first we should concentrate our reflections on a previous matter, namely the intellectual, a figure that, in fact, is certainly ill defined and elusive. The question to ask ourselves is: What is an intellectual? We cannot unequivocally and precisely answer this question, even though a simple approach would present us with a person who is studious and thoughtful. In fact, research on the role of intellectuals has always gone hand in hand with interlinked issues of knowledge and power, thought and action, theory and practice, and utopia and reality. Throughout history, the figure of the intellectual has experienced periods of indifference, if not hostility, along with other periods in which intellectuals have been considered as privileged leaders and as individuals who shine a light towards a future, sometimes enticingly, sometimes with bitter-sweetness, but always with a fascination experienced through a spirit of change.

With the passage of time, intellectuals have lost their traditional role, to be replaced by figures who are more suited to exerting a more direct and extensive social influence, such as, for example, the columnist and the professional politician, though this is too expeditious a conclusion as to be fully taken into consideration. We live in an age in which the end of virtually everything—of modernity, of ideologies, of history—is prophesied. And venturing the end of the intellectual is particularly irrational due, in large part, to the ambiguity that the term intellectual has always operated under. As Maldonado highlights (1998), in contemporary society, intellectuals are seen as a social actor equipped with a particular faculty: the power to make sure they are listened to owing to their ideas, and to influence—for better or for worse—public opinion. They were listened to because they had a voice, even though they were almost always men of writing and it didn't matter if they were the object of admiration or reproach. The allocation of new roles, also considered intellectual ones, marked the beginning of a constituent redefinition of the intellectual, and in this sense, scientists should be included in the intellectual category, which means opening this status to doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers, and so forth, based on the fact that those who carry out intellectual work should be considered to be intellectuals, although according to a redefinition of intellectual work closer to the mental as opposed to the physical sense. In the contrast between the physical and the mental, which has dominated in recent times, lies the obscuring and weakening of that kind of intellectual who represented a critical specificity with regards to the events of his or her time. In short, the notion of the type of intellectuality that we have just described entails emphatically accepting the role of the type of intellectual that, in each era, would have accepted and taken part in the dynamics of change and social innovation.

And within this role, in our view, we must include that performed by educators and teachers because, in short, they are people with opinions—or alternative opinions—who are able to act in contrast to dogmas, bodies of doctrine, models of behaviour and symbolic systems, as well as to preexisting assertions of power. This unorthodox attitude surely coincides with the tradition of intellectuals.

History has taught us some fairly perverse things, in which roles are interchangeable: what is done in one way today may be done in another tomorrow. Such is the case of the heterodox-delegitimizer and that of the orthodox-legitimizer, in a permanent complex of interaction, in which the matter, context and circumstances that are objects of contention are not irrelevant.

"All points, it should clearly be said, not only concern the scientist-intellectual as an individual social actor, but also as member of a research collective, as a collaborator—for example, that of a large research laboratory with hundreds or thousands of highly specialized scientists. Such a formidable group of scientist-intellectuals constitutes a significant new social development in social knowledge production and innovation. If we look closely, this research collective acts—if I am permitted to express it in this way—as a true and authentic collective individual. From this viewpoint, it seems justified to recognize it, to all intents and purposes, as a new intellectual figure: the intellectual-scientist-collective, as it has been called" (Maldonado, 1998, 41). And it is true, we would add, that education, teaching or research often require working as a team; change does not tend to come about by acting alone.

We are convinced of the dominant role of the teacher as an intellectual, but not all teachers are intellectuals, just as not all scientists working in an organization occupy the same hierarchical level within it, since there of course exists a hierarchy of skills, as has always been the case in any technocratic structure. We therefore advocate the educator as an intellectual and as a learned figure in our time, in any past time and in any time to come, which means reflecting on—if not redefining—certain basic issues inherent in the figure of the teacher, a profession that has to be carried out with a different style and under new conditions.

In this line of thinking, the first thing we must do is admit that we know very little about the complexity of how to advance studies involving the huge body that children and young people comprise. Therefore, we must assume our ignorance, not from a position of weakness, but as a basis for practices of strength, ideas and principles.

However, there is not only the need to recognize certain ignorance on the question; we must add a new concept for training educators that instils attitudes and strategies that are considered basic for research into practitioners: principles, methods and research techniques that should be an essential part of the educator's training curriculum and without which it is difficult to comply with a third requirement, which is that those who study educational problems in depth must have the skill and knowledge required to work with them and on them, and ultimately be learned figures who have deep knowledge of what they teach, how they teach it and what its consequences are. The behavioural and social sciences use research techniques and hold attitudes that are essential for studying the problems of the teaching profession. Future teachers must have an adequate knowledge of all this, and only through doing so can they consider further-reaching career goals.

2.2. Changes—but what changes?

Let us undertake an exercise in historical memory on education, teaching and teachers. Through doing so, we can say that society has never expected the school to be systematically reflexive in terms of the work required, for the simple reason that it was thought that there would apparently be no great complexity in the simple work of instruction and, therefore, few activities related to teaching would require serious, reasoned and scientifically and socially valued attention, reflection and research because few problems were visible in the act of teaching.

Indeed, schools, and therefore the various teachers at the different educational levels, were seen merely as dispensaries—simple distribution centres for handing out information and cultural orientation, if not mere knowledge that was developed by other social groups and that, in any event, was often stored in books. However, paradoxically, it was always thought that school was a place where something more than what might be supposed of a simple physical place for teaching should happen, given the great intellectual demands now required of it, assuming, implicitly, the great complexity that the act of teaching and learning requires. Ultimately, it seems clear that our ignorance about teaching is a fact that has been present (and very much so), allowing discovery of what understanding the mysteries of human learning entails and how intellectual and social values are in fact assimilated.

If teaching is understood as the work of an educational vendor, it ends up being merely a routine task, with pedagogy separated from appropriate erudition. We must recognize that education is an intellectual profession: a profession whose essential undertaking is the transmission of cultural assets and the use of intelligence, and a profession that makes decisions about instruction, with a division of duties between those who contribute to the genesis of knowledge—or its synthesis with educational purposes—and those who succinctly impart it in schools. Educators cannot be deprived of their innate intellectual rights, and they must unleash the full power of intelligence as an educator or teacher.

Throughout history and since Socrates, it has been openly understood that education trains and prepares a person for a pursuit of knowledge throughout his or her life, especially in a society such as that of today, which is known as the Knowledge Society. Schools cannot be deprived of learned teachers who have mastery of the conceptual tools and methods of research that are indispensable for discovering the learning process as it works in their own classrooms. Schools must pay attention to increasing knowledge and producing learned teachers. In our view, we cannot aspire to anything less; otherwise, we will have to accept as a constant the permanent and abundant discourse about the education crisis, trivializing the causes that produce it.

We believe that the current educational literature excessively specifies and focuses on the fact and the problem of getting good teachers, with a relative neglect of the analysis of the educational qualities of the institutions for which such staff are sought. There has always been writing on about almost everything to do with teachers, but there is a surprisingly low productivity for literature about the intrinsic rewards available for teachers as teachers and for educators as educators. There have been many virtuous conversations about the primacy of intellectual goals in education, but an eerie silence about how this search for the intellectual should be linked to educational institutions.

It is impossible to continue with the naive belief and the weak discourse to the effect that just by successfully making contact with the disciplinary content are complex educational problems relating to the education of today's children and young people resolved. What are required are moderate or drastic changes on the conditions of teaching, on the extent and type of financial support, on the facilities and, above all and fundamentally, on the nature of teachers and the image of what educational institutions must reasonably provide.

After many years dedicated to teaching, first at the primary level and then at the university as professors to teachers and educators, we perceive the need for changes that have not been made until the present moment. And even, distressingly, speeches about the need for rebellion are exalted, but there is little practical wisdom about how to bring it about. In addition, the rigidity of the system is terrifying, with criticism coming from outside being met with great weariness, and a considerable absence of promoting an atmosphere that is open to internal criticism. Undoubtedly, the severity of the previously established creates a constant deadweight that prevents appropriate and necessary reasoning.

3. The educator as researcher

We recognize that the literature on educational reforms is especially heavy: long winded, tiresome, too general, and, above all, inconsistent with respect to what, in our view, are important problems. We once read , with regard to international reports on academic performance, that in a country such as Finland, where this performance stands out significantly over the rest of the countries of the world, educators are trained to diagnose their students' learning difficulties (reading, writing, doing sums, and so forth). Simply contemplating such a situation in our immediate academic environment would be utopic. Traditionally, the training of primary, secondary and university teachers has been designed based on three formative aspects: general education, discipline-based specialist studies or the disciplines that are to be taught and vocational training specific to an activity. We can say, without much risk of being wrong, that the opportunity that a future teacher has for a liberating general experience is almost exactly the same as that of any other student who goes to university.

Of course, it is superficial to debate the degree of knowledge that is necessary to begin to teach when we ignore the central issue of how teachers can continue learning during their professional lives as teachers. It can be said that the real problem with the substantive knowledge that new teachers possess is not its initial quantity, but the fact that the educational-institution environment provides very little for it to increase on a continual basis. Elsewhere (Nieto, 2000) we have reflected on the training of university professors and the inability to make great efforts to establish systematic individualized support that provides orientation throughout the teaching career.

It is true that there has been an increase in continuing training courses for teachers for all levels, which are normally brilliantly organized and even presented with a certain artistic beauty. But believing that their existence ensures more capable teachers is a sign of excessive naivety about the realities required by teaching. Future teachers should be sophisticated and learned with regard to the subject that they intend to teach, but it is impossible to wind up future educators and have them play cerebral music. Ultimately, appropriate means should be found to keep them lively and capable of renewal and harmony of thought, a task that should already be encouraged from university. But this is not what happens in reality. What we find are monotonous study plans and loads of academic disciplines that are ambiguous and confused. Teachers' pedagogical experience is scarcely taken into account, with the consequent abandonment of the educational effects or the effects of the work itself. We cannot pretend that each new study plan is an experience to excite our teaching situation when they are accompanied by such sparing analysis of the situation and real demands of teaching. No rigorous and detailed studies have been conducted—or at least as far as we know—about the intellectual and professional preparation of education professors, but we have sensed throughout our professional lives that there has been a lot more interest in expressing suggestions for the improvement of practice, regardless of how proven they are, than there has been in the domain of analysis instruments and research methods and strategies that are necessary for studying practice. Incidentally, it suffices to recall the disrepute into which action research, which was poorly used, with a great aura of theorizing but a great lack of practical knowledge, has fallen. Many of us have forgotten—or perhaps we have never understood—that education is not in itself a distinct and unique scholarly discipline, but rather a complex phenomenon that requires an analysis of many approaches and the conceptual tools of various disciplines. This—uncorroborated—opinion has throughout history generated confusion with devastating effects. Education requires a close association between people who have had a rich and successful experience in aspects related to practice (let us remember the case of the rural teacher to whom we referred at the start of this work), experts who are well versed in certain fields and who have dedicated their lives to the analysis of educational problems, and, of course, educational guides, supervisors or administrators. Without such confluence, understanding the educational phenomenon in its entirety, both on a theoretical and practical level, is a mere utopia.

Regarding what has been asserted earlier, we must not forget that the largest contributions to the understanding of education were not made by practitioners acting alone, but by humanists interested in certain aspects of philosophy, history and philology: anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and experts in social learning and analysing the school as an institution. Simply imagining that the study of education is, or ever was, the special prerogative of professional educators is dangerously arrogant and does not produce more than self-deceit. It is impossible to proceed to the conquest and possession of the field of education, in the manner of a chemist or a doctor who enjoys professional authority about their discipline; what we should propose is the production of teachers who have a vast culture and intellectual curiosity; who are experts in some special area (according to the circumstances or educational levels); who are creative; who have deep human sensitivity and deep-rooted values; who are researchers with their own style (style is always a product of specialists: style is the exclusive privilege of the expert), which must provide them with a thorough understanding of the educational issues that affect them . In this regard, it occurs to us to put forward the need to include in the curricular designs for teacher training a whole set of professional baggage, acquired through research on themes present in professional educational activity such as academic performance or evaluation of educational institutions—insufficiently filtered fields of knowledge, but ones that would constitute a wide range of necessary and desirable knowledge for any person who must professionally engage in teaching. Consequently, in some of the work we have carried out lately, we have begun to properly compile theory on academic achievement (Nieto, 2008). Any minimally knowledgeable intellectual would advise us, in this regard, to not let ourselves be swayed by the severity of the previously established. In this sense, we perceive a great shortage of ideas on teachers' intellectual training.

Educators need to master appropriate research methods and develop an attitude towards their profession that is more inquisitive than dogmatic. Being practical alone is not enough; a much more important obligation is to decide how to prepare and support learned teachers to meticulously dissect what happens in class and to find out more about how the child learns, or how their learning fails—in short, not only to master certain intellectual skills, but, rather, to develop intellectual tools that facilitate pedagogical analysis. Studies on educational innovation are not simple exhortations about suitable changes in education. They use theoretical formulations that stem, in a way, from other social sciences; and in this analysis, educational research as an element of the intellectual configuration of the future education professional cannot be left to one side.

The idea of a school as educational dispensary is embedded in a very widespread belief that schooling is an easy and routine task, even though, paradoxically, in the face of such a social belief, society could hardly condone particular advantages granted to teachers (for example, holidays) if it imagined teaching as something more than a mere routine transmission of basic information. There is, therefore, a lack of an analytical research tradition, which makes the development of an authority that is not exclusively based on a system of professional knowledge impossible. We must not forget that the language, tools and processes of research, as well as the conceptualizations that are used in investigations, are shared by psychologists, sociologists and specialists in educational research, but without educators taking part in them. In general, teachers do not possess a common technical work vocabulary, or a set of concepts or projects that are sufficiently precise to be shared by an associated professional community.

Such an absence of codified knowledge robs teachers of the psychological rewards associated with the progress of knowledge. What the administration promises as good future teachers is puzzling: we have focused on what the role of the teacher should be, and have forgotten, or even ignored, analysis of what permits the very educational institution. Our inability to secure a minimum of scholarship has always been, and remains today, a great failure of our education systems. It is very important to disclose what we know, but it is much more important to highlight what we do not know. In general, education programs for teachers have rarely been prepared for a continuous and deep professional relationship, given that, ordinarily, their only objective has been to prepare novices for the demands of the moment, trained to distribute academically respectable themes—and that's not the case.

3.1. The educator and modern science

The academic training of teachers must imbue ideas and principles that are present in the scientific world today, such as the form and way of transmitting to students a rigorous intellectual and methodological configuration. It is essential not only to put across the need for the importance of research and that of the educator as researcher, but also to convey a critical attitude as an educator, given that the educator also contributes to the creation, development and dissemination of knowledge, however modest and unobtrusive that contribution may be. In that regard, we can highlight some areas of interest and reflection with regard to scientific research.

a) Scientific mindset

The scientific orientation of education is based on understanding, description, explanation, prediction and intervention based on simple but important assumptions, since, it is understood, phenomena tend to follow a natural order—or not—and research helps us to find solutions, which must contribute to generating a scientific mindset in all educators. And from this overall formative perspective, which we not only anchor in the traditional rigour of scientific methodology, we can propose research processes based on a problem that a teacher may raise in their educational practice. But, moreover, an educator or teacher should and must know basic interpretative issues related to data and public phenomena (a social survey, for example) or private phenomena that serve them as a platform of/for convictions on and the creation of a coherent professional discourse. Undoubtedly, current science has many facets (Fernández-Rañada, 1995), and the educator, as a cultured person who invigorates his or her profession in contact with people in the process of comprehensive training, cannot feel removed from the scientific discourse, past or present.

b) The collection of empirical data

The beginnings of science can be found in Aristotle in the fourth century BC, since he supposed the existence of an order in the universe that can be described in a systematic manner through the compilation of empirical—that is, observable—data. The search for a coherent interpretation of such data is what can lead the teacher to the acquisition of a desirable and suitable scientific mindset. But, we repeat, there is no reason to bring to teacher training the traditional research rigour to enhance daily practice; if we deny an education professional the possibility of being able to learn and know how to acquire information about their students through, for example, a semantic differential and analysing data and interpreting them, we are mutilating his or her intellectual evolution. In a coherent and sensible world, people would not understand how an educator had not managed to gain the basic knowledge to analyse and interpret, by way of example, the PISA reports. Who has shown that such training is not positive? And, worse still, who has demonstrated the need for other platforms that go against what we are advocating? We should not deceive ourselves, and nor should we fall into the greatest naivety, but we have the impression, simply endorsed by not inconsiderable experience, that pedagogy has needed to live on heated debates on educational innovation, without focusing the dialectic on really meaningful and relevant problems.

c) The search for general principles

Modern scientists have catalogued observations as general principles that we call laws and theories; and in our understanding the educator can make intellectual use of such laws and theories to guide the direction of comment and actions related to his or her future professional activity. But, although comment is important, it is equally true that observation in the classroom is the principle behind all knowledge and scientific resolution, the basis of all diagnosis and educational intervention. Reflecting on the coming about of scientific interest in Darwin or in Bernard is not without consequence, or on the interest of observation in the classroom, the basis and principle of educational methodology.

d) Fair thought

A very important feature of current scientific methodology is the right to fair thought, balanced, as always, through a systematic, objective and rational approach, avoiding unjustified beliefs and expectations. We have commented that current science has multiple facets and perspectives, allowing different methodologies and accepting some without excluding others. We understand, however, that thought must follow—and it is desirable for it to do so—the laws of logic, and even of common sense, if appropriate. We should not make unnecessary assumptions to support a cause or an argument; we should adopt the criteria of simplicity, precision and clarity of thought and action.

e) Self-correction

Current science, and modern scientists in particular, accept the uncertainty of their own conclusions. The changing content of science is produced through old explanations being rethought in light of evolution; changes in such explanations, as well as in laws, are a very important part of scientific progress. In fact, scientific logic argues that in reality it is never possible to demonstrate that a statement is true: we can only prove that it is false. There is a significant accumulation of scientific knowledge related to education. It is always open to questioning and always in the process of self-correction. It is incomprehensible that it has not reached the classroom; our experience in this regard is that such knowledge has not been properly sifted to generate minds with intellectual competence that is grounded in scientific research.

f) Publication of results

A permanent exchange of information is vital to the advancement of scientific knowledge, with this principle being valid for any intellectual, and we as teachers, as we have already said, understand that it is. The exchange of experiences, forms of action, scientific and professional meetings, and so forth constitute a continual source of wealth in the face of isolated work and opinion. Publications must be free from technical complication and should be made using a language that is common and accessible to the professional educational community, having previously developed a curricular environment that is favourable to such intellectual development. There are many current publications that include innovative experiments, which are organized, presented and published more for the novelty or the ostentation intended to be ascribed to them than for the operational effects that they could offer. Most are certainly presented from a novel perspective, but they lack a minimum of quality control or evaluation of any kind. It is assumed out of hand that if it is original and avant-garde, it must be good and effective.

g) Replication

Replication is another important component of the scientific approach and of the educator's activities. We must be able to repeat procedures and obtain similar results as basic elements of consolidation of scientific and practical knowledge—in our case, pedagogical knowledge. Ultimately, it cannot be denied that science affects our lives like no other product of human intelligence. Yet most of us are unaware of almost everything about its history and of how its methods, without which our civilization would be different, were built. All this amounts to a great challenge in the training of educators and teachers in today's society.

In our understanding, then, the type of teacher described here can only be achieved through intellectual and cultural aspiration and perspectives, giving a full account of the current professional demands that arise from the actions required of teachers.