SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CONVIVENCIA ESCOLAR: TENSIONS AND ISSUES IN LATIN AMERICA COMMENT ON COHEN & THAPA 2016

CLIMAT SCOLAIRE ET BIEN VIVRE ENSEMBLE : TENSIONS ET DÉFIS EN AMÉRIQUE LATINE COMMENTAIRE DE L'ARTICLE DE COHEN & THAPA 2017

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RÉSUMÉ

Au Chili, tout comme dans toute l'Amérique Latine et les pays Ibéro-américains, il existe un terme qui est utilisé communément et scientifiquement pour étudier la vie scolaire au-delà de la performance scolaire : « *convivencia escolar* ». Sa traduction directe est la coéxistence à l'école, et le terme le plus proche utilisé dans la littérature anglosaxonne est climat scolaire. Cependant, pour beaucoup de chercheurs ibéro-américains, ces termes ne sont pas synonymes. Bien que le concept de « coexistence scolaire » soit une construction socio-historique en Amérique Latine, il est aussi profondément connecté aux changements et aux transformations dans la recherche et l'intervention éducative globale, spécialement ceux en relation avec les directives de l'UNESCO pour le développement d'une éducation démocratique, participative et inclusive. Cependant, cette perspective formative sur le climat scolaire/coéxistence engendre des tensions en raison du poids des comptes à rendre et de l'imposition des plus grandes responsabilités dévolues aux établissements par nombre de politiques publiques en éducation en Amérique latine au cours de la dernière décennie. Cela semble être un scénario politique global. Comme le montrent Cohen et Thapa (2017) aux Etats Unis, il est nécessaire que les décideurs en éducation de la région Amérique latine clarifient les objectifs des réformes sur le climat scolaire quant aux raisons de faire du climat scolaire une priorité et à leurs cibles.

MOTS-CLÉS : Climat scolaire, bienêtre enseignant, pleine conscience.

ABSTRACT

In Chile, as well as in all Latin American and Iberoamerican countries, there is a term that is both commonly and scientifically used to study school life beyond academic achievement: *convivencia escolar*. Its direct translation is school coexistence, and the closest term used in the anglosaxon literature is school climate. However, for many Iberoamerican researchers, the terms are not synonyms. Although the concept of "school coexistence" is a sociohistorically situated construction in Latin America, it is also deeply connected with the changes and transformations in global educational research and intervention, especially those related to the guidelines of UNESCO for the development of a democratic, participatory and inclusive education. Nevertheless, this formative perspective towards school climate/coexistence is tensioned by accountability and high-stakes testing prioritized by many Latin American educational policies during the last decade. This seems to be a global political scenario. As Cohen and Thapa (2017) have found in the U.S., there is probably a need from educational leaders in the Latin American Region to clarify what is meant by school climate reform policies, and to why and how they should make school climate a priority.

KEY WORDS : School climate, *convivencia escolar*, educational policies

In Chile, as well as in all Latin American and Iberoamerican countries, there is a term that is both commonly and scientifically used to study school life beyond academic achievement: *convivencia escolar*. Its direct translation is school coexistence, and the closest term used in the anglosaxon literature is school climate.

However, for many Iberoamerican researchers, the terms are not synonyms since a) school climate is more related to school norms and highly driven towards developing a climate that allows school achievement; b) school coexistence is more linked to cultural values of strenghthening democracy and building capacities for citizenship. However, from our point of view, the definition of school climate that more closely resembles that of school coexistence is that of the National School Climate Center in NY, "School climate refers to the quality and character of school life as it relates to norms and values, interpersonal relations and social interactions, and organizational processes and structures" (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009).

According to Cohen, Blaya, & López (2015), the transition from "school violence" to "school climate" was due to a global transformation in school research and intervention, which recognized a) that the reduction of school violence did not necessarily improve The quality of school life; b) Consequently, it was necessary to invest resources in improving the conditions that make possible the construction of positive, preventive and promotional forms of relationship. From this perspective, the approaches of the World Health Organization in relation to the development of primary and secondary prevention policies and how they could be incorporated in school through the promotion of enriched school climates became of great importance.

However, it is specifically the dimension of participation that connects with what in Ibero-American and Latin American literature is understood by school coexistence: a situated practice of interpersonal and group relationships between different, that generate, a given school climate that can be qualified as positive / negative, toxic / nourishing, etc.

From this perspective, several Latin American researchers (Fierro, 2013) have argued that "school climate", as opposed to "school coexistence" a) offers a static, "photographic" view, gathered at a specific moment (through cross-sectional studies) of the perception of students or the school community about the quality of the school environment. On the contrary, school coexistence refers to concrete, everyday and locally situated practices that occur in a sustained manner over time; b) school climate is understood either as a "pre-condition" or as an "effect" of school life; c) school climate would be less modifiable than the school life, which would be essentially learnable; "To live together is something we all learn to do".

However, these conceptual differences have not been documented, sufficiently argued or published in Latin American or Anglo-Saxon literature. Thus, a pending challenge is the conceptual argumentation of the similarities and differences between the Anglo-Saxon concept of school climate and the Ibero-American concept of school

coexistence.

Altogether, the spirit of the sense of school coexistence according to which this would be a behavior and attitude to be learned in and through the school, is present in the Delors Report (1996), "Education Contains a treasure: Report of the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century" (see also Burnett, 2008). The Delors Report set the tone in Latin American for the widespread adoption of the concept of coexistence, by deepening the approach of the World Declaration on Education for All, concerning the satisfaction of basic learning needs (UNICEF, 1990; UNESCO, 2000). Together with the knowledges of learning to know and learning to do (accomplishing tasks with 'matter and technique') two more knowledges are integrated that are fundamental to this discussion: learning together, and learning to live with others (Delors, 1996).

In conclusion, although the concept of "school coexistence" is a sociohistorically situated construction in Latin America, it is also deeply connected with the changes and transformations in global educational research and intervention, especially those related to the guidelines of UNESCO for the development of a democratic, participatory and inclusive education (López, 2014).

However, much of the current school-based policies of Latin American countries are also in compliance with guidelines issued by other international organizations, such as the World Bank and the OECD, which strongly pressure measurable, quantifiable, and therefore comparable results, and that place the school community as a means to achieve the greater goal: to improve academic performance in standardized tests.

PUBLIC POLICIES IN SCHOOL COEXISTENCE: BETWEEN PUNITIVE AND FORMATIVE APPROACHES

In 2011, The Inter-American Institute of Human Rights (IIDH) disseminated a study on the state of the art regarding legal protection, and the political, institutional and operational conditions for exercising human rights in education. Seventeen countries of America participated. A policy analysis was performed, through the request for institutional documentation to the National Ministries of Education (laws, ordinances, regulations, empirical data, studies and evaluations). A total of 136 documents were included.

A follow-up study of the above data performed by the coordinator of the former study, Rodino (2012), reported that only half of the countries studied and / or collected statistical information on their policies. 13 of the 17 participating countries had some kind of ministerial orientation regarding peaceful coexistence and prevention of school violence, evidencing the need to promote participatory action. The implementation processes had the weakness of not identifying a specific entity that is clearly

responsible, dividing supervision or management in different departments and entities. While most countries had nationally available educational materials, budgets for working in the area were difficult to identify. Some collaborative links were observed with nongovernmental and local government entities to implement policies, however, these would not be systematic. Finally, most countries monitored, but not consistently.

In 2011, PLAN and UNICEF presented a toolbox for protection against violence in schools, which included the revision of legislation in 33 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (Eljach, 2011). The results warned that most countries (n = 20) did not prohibit physical punishment at school, reaching situations like those in the Caribbean, where it was considered as a corrective measure. In Central America and Mexico, although punishments were prohibited by law, in practice they continued to be executed. In addition, repressive anti-delinquency measures were implemented within schools, which places students and communities at risk for stigmatizing processes.

In the international discussion about policies related to school coexistence, there is a concern of the negative effect of the excess of standardized tests that pressure and stress schools, and the practices of exclusion and school segregation that are resistant to inclusion measures in countries with high levels of inequality and school segregation by SES. There is a progressive trend in Latin American countries towards policies of accountability that involve the area of school coexistence through a) standardized tests with consequences for schools and its administrators, b) the installation of public devices to report acts of school violence, against which the State undertakes to investigate in a fiscalizing manner.

For example, in Chile Law 20,529 on Quality Assurance of Education, created a Superintendence of Education and an Agency for Quality Education, the first in charge of supervising the establishments and the second to evaluate and support the quality of Education, incorporating other non-academic indicators of quality such as the climate of school coexistence. The new institutionality, however, is installed in a culture that is nationally punitive with an emphasis on quality as measured by performance indicators in national tests. At the same time, the Law on School Violence of 2011 installed a double logic: on one side, a punitive logic of control and sanction (schools must comply with protocols that safeguard the fair procedure, and can be economically fined if they do not have them) and on the other side, a logic of democratic school climate, by creating the role of Coordinators of School Coexistence, committees of coexistence and preventive, formative training (Carrasco, López & Estay, 2011). Despite a National School Coexistence Policy, of a formative nature and promulgated by the Ministry of Education, these changes strongly pressure school establishments and the education system itself, since these actors receive from the authorities recommendations, guidelines, instructions and mandates constructed from dissimilar logics, which finally have economic and social consequences.

In the case of Mexico, barely a decade ago, there were no precise guidelines for

dealing with violence in schools (Zurita, 2011). In 2007, coinciding with the beginning of the so-called "war on crime" at the national level, "Safe School" was created as one of the federal strategic programs in the education sector, which is part of the National Security Strategy Clean Mexico. At present there is an emergence of different discourses, some complementary, others diverse and still conflicting, depending on the dimensions they emphasize (educational, economic, political, legal, cultural, health) as well as the theoretical perspective they favor. For example, in the General Law on the Rights of Children and Adolescents, approved at the end of 2014, there is a contradiction that prevails between combating school violence and improving coexistence in schools. Part with a broad speech to address the discussion based on premises on coexistence, which is progressively modified at the time of outlining the forecasts for action. It proposes the promotion of "harmonious coexistence and the integral development of children and adolescents", but focuses in particular on the issue of "bullying or school violence".

Similar to the Chilean School Violence Act, the Mexican Law proposes the design of strategies for the early detection, containment, prevention and eradication of harassment or school violence and contemplates the creation of permanent mediation mechanisms in parents and guardings. It proposes the development of training activities for public servants, as well as free mechanisms of care, counseling and follow-up of children and adolescents involved in a situation of bullying or school violence. But it also establishes the application of sanctions to those responsible for carrying out, promoting, tolerating or denouncing acts of bullying or school violence. Something similar is observed in the new program for School Coexistence (PACE), which replaces the Safe School Program, as of this year. PACE articulates in an indistinct way strategies that derive both from a logic of combating violence, and promoting the coexistence.

In the case of Colombia, Law No. 1620 of School Coexistence of 2013, which aims to "contribute to the formation of active citizens who contribute to the construction of a democratic, participatory, pluralistic and intercultural society" (p.1), seeks to generate training mechanisms for dealing with situations that threaten school life, with strategies for prevention, protection and denunciation of these situations. However, it also includes a system of infractions, sanctions and incentives that seeks to ensure that all school institutions implement care routes for situations related to interpersonal conflicts or different school violence.

Thus, we can observe in these three countries, the overlapping of two discourses that orient the action in different directions. Perhaps this is what in the U.S., Cohen and Thapa (2017) have depicted as a need coming from educational leaders (building and district) for clarification as to what is meant by school climate reform policies, and to why and how they should make school climate a priority. The recently passaged *Every Student Succeeds Act* that comes into effect in 2017 mandates that all State Departments of Education measure at least one "non-academic" aspects of student learning and/or school life. As they pose, school climate, student engagement, access to

advanced coursework, and postsecondary readiness are mentioned as possible metrics that the U.S. Department of Education is recommending U.S. States to consider. This mandate will probably create a scenario similar to the onedepicted above. In Cohen and Thapa´s national survey, more than half (57%) of the building school leaders (principals, assistant principals, and school climate coordinators), and at least one district of 24 out of the 37 states represented in their survey reported using at least one reliable and valid school climate survey. However, that fact that the sample was not representative, and that only 6% of all of the educator leaders contacted actually answered the survey, needs to be taken into account. We agree with Cohen and Thapa (2017) that this 6% might probably reflect those leaders who are more willing, able, or feel more trained to deal with school climate improvement efforts. It is the 94% of the other schools/districts who will probably raise issues regarding the whys and hows of the policy and measurement practices that will now be mandated by the 2016 *Every Student Succeeds Act.*

As can be seen, these issues will probably raise similar tensions as the ones we have depicted for Latin America. Therefore, there is a great need to engage in collaborative efforts both for research as well as for intervention and policy making.

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