LA ESCUELA BAJO SOSPECHA

sociología progresista y crítica
para pensar la educación para todos

emilio tenti fanfani

Institute of Latin American Studies
ILAS
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Schools Under Suspicion

Progressive and Critical Sociology to Think About Education for All

Written by:

Emilio Tenti Fanfani, Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Argentina.

Comments by Pablo Pineau, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Americas Dialogue on Education Policy Book & Paper Talks Series

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The Americas Dialogue on Education Policy (ADEP) is an initiative created in 2018 by the Institute of Latin American Studies (ILAS) at Columbia University to foster communication between countries of the Americas on Latin American education policy. ADEP regularly organizes regional conferences that bring together scholars, experts, and policymakers to discuss issues related to education across the Americas and suggest tailored solutions to common challenges. ILAS currently partners with the Latinx and Latin American Faculty Working Group at Teachers College, Columbia University, to carry out its activities.

In 2021, ADEP began offering a series of book and paper talks that feature the latest publications in education policy in Latin American and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean countries. The objective of these talks is to present new research to a diverse audience of professionals and higher education students to receive feedback to improve policy, while also fostering this way of understanding and cooperation throughout the Americas.

Since it is not always possible to keep up to date with new publications, let alone in all languages spoken in the American continent, the ADEP Book and Paper Talks Series was created to provide an academic resource ready for use in higher education, research, and policy analysis.

Content
Event summary: Pablo Pineau, University of Buenos Aires, Argentina.
Book summary: Emilio Tenti Fanfani, Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Argentina.
Translation from Spanish: Romina Quezada Morales, Teachers College, Columbia University, USA.

Production
Esteban Andrade, Program Manager
Romina Quezada Morales, ADEP Coordinator
Gabriela Chacón Ugarte, ADEP Assistant
k-12outreach@lists.columbia.edu

Copyediting: Gabriela Chacón Ugarte

Design
ArKar Hein
akh2177@tc.columbia.edu

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MEET THE AUTHOR

Emilio Tenti was born in Italy and is a naturalized Argentinian. He is a track tenure Professor and Researcher at Argentina's National Pedagogical University (Universidad Pedagógica Nacional), and Consult Professor[1] at the National University in Cuyo, Mendoza, where he served as Dean of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences in the 1970s. He holds a university doctoral degree from the Political Science National Foundation in Paris.

Over the course of 30 years, Dr. Tenti worked as Principal Investigator of Argentina's National Council for Scientific and Technical Research (Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas de la Argentina, CONICET), as well as tenure Professor of Sociology of Education at the University of Buenos Aires' Faculty of Social Science. He lived and worked, taught and carried out research in Colombia, Mexico and France, where he was appointed Simón Bolívar Professor at Sorbonne. In Mexico, he was a Researcher at the Javier Barros Sierra Foundation's Center for Prospective Studies, the National Pedagogical University, and UNAM; in Colombia, he was Chief of the Department of Administration and Planning of the Education Division at the Universidad del Valle in Cali. He worked as a Consultant for UNICEF, UNESCO and the Organization of Ibero-American States (OEI in Spanish) in Argentina.

In addition to *La escuela bajo sospecha*, Dr. Tenti has published several books and papers in scholarly journals throughout Latin America.

Contact: emiliotenti@gmail.com

[1] In Argentina, Consult Professors, or *profesores consultos*, is an honorary title granted to outstanding professors after they retire. This category is only below the Professor Emeritus category.

BOOK PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

When: February 9, 2022, from 3:30pm to 4:30pm EST
Where: Virtually

By Pablo Pineau
University of Buenos Aires

La Escuela bajo Sospecha. Sociología progresista y crítica para pensar la Educación para todos (Schools Under Suspicion. Progressive and Critical Sociology to Think About Education for All), published in 2021 by Siglo XXI, is the most recent book written by EmilioTenti, a well-known Argentine scholar. It focuses on the current sociological and political problems of education in Argentina, and its arguments can be used to understand the situation in other countries of the region and the world.

The book presentation was led by the author. He began by mentioning that education in his country, once almost sacred, is nowadays said to be in crisis, or under suspicion. For at least three decades, assessment schooling has become assessed schooling at the national and international levels. The widespread institutionalization of systems and programs for evaluating the quality of education proves that schools, their practices, agents and products are under suspicion. In a somewhat schematic way, he explained that, while some positions see this educational situation as the result of a structural inability of the State to provide efficient public services, others – like his – believe that the reasons are more complex and have their roots in the economic, political and social history of societies. Therefore, **it is necessary to go beyond pointing out educational unfulfilled promises, and produce plausible explanations based on data to show accountability, instead of simply measuring the inequalities and injustice that the school systems of the region produce and reproduce.**

Tenti also explained the complex relationship between the school system and the social structure, a typical thematic axis of the sociological tradition. He pointed out that, on the one hand, it is necessary to understand to what extent the position that students and their families have in the social space accounts not only for their school trajectories, but also their learning outcomes. On the other hand, this analysis should recognize the effects of schooling and the degrees obtained on the very configuration of the social structure.

Finally, Tenti highlighted that the book includes a chapter written in the heat of the COVID-19 pandemic's impacts on school routines. Briefly, it holds that the pandemic has accentuated social inequalities and inequalities in terms of schooling and learning of powerful knowledge, which tend to be concentrated in dominant social sectors, that is, in the urban bourgeoisie, to the detriment of socially dominated groups from the countryside and the city. In view of this educational catastrophe, he proposed building three possible scenarios:

the conservative/restorative scenario, the technocratic-mercantilist scenario, and what the author calls the egalitarian-humanist scenario. Evidence points out to who are the carriers interested in these projects, what arguments they use, and what resources they can mobilize.

Following the presentation, Regina Cortina and Pablo Pineau made some remarks on their reading of the book and the author's presentation. Cortina highlighted how the book explores liberalism and its effect on public school systems and shows the incongruences of a state interested in social equality while keeping a focus on mercantilism. Another topic brought up by Cortina was the relation between the traditional school system, which seeks to fit everyone into society, and the youth from marginalized areas across Latin America, who do not see themselves as fitting in the current education structure. She pinpointed the rapid changes in school systems and the problems with technology that the pandemic caused in education as two more points in the book.

Afterwards, Pineau focused on the value of the book as a manual for pedagogy and as an exploration of different topics in Sociology of education. He wrapped up by describing the book's analysis of the post-pandemic educational situation.

The discussion was vibrant. One question asked about the actual social and cultural demands on schooling and how they can be met. The author stated that schools are asked to deliver more and more results. Using Mexico as an example, Tenti described how nineteenth-century school systems set simple goals for their formal education curricula – Spanish as the official language, geography and basic mathematical operations. However, this relative simplicity has disappeared. Nowadays, schools are responsible for teaching values, healthy eating habits, financial literacy, or culture sensitivity. The school curriculum is overloaded and, of course, it is impossible to fully study all topics, a profitable situation for many politicians. For that reason, the author highlights the importance of establishing new realistic goals for schools.

The event lasted 15 minutes longer than planned, and additional questions that could not be answered live were answered later on via email.

The recording of the book presentation and discussion is available ILAS's YouTube channel at La Escuela Bajo Sospecha: Presentation & Discussion w/ Emilio Tenti - YouTube

BOOK SUMMARY

The Origin of the Book

Basic and compulsory education entered the 21st century under suspicion, that is, a great portion of society was not satisfied with its benefits, which seemingly did not meet many of the expectations that society had on education. Education did not manage to develop a set of basic, powerful knowledge elements in most new generations. This institution, which used assessments as one of its core educational devices, has been an object of assessment over more than 30 years.

National and international assessments taking place in most Latin American countries show that almost half of those who finish their primary and/or secondary education feature outstanding deficiencies in fundamental learning achievements. However, the data from those school performance assessments provoke multiple interpretations. Schematically, two typical positions can be observed. At the one end, the moderate right political ideological pole insists in holding public schools, especially teachers, accountable for low performances. Given that remark, and with no further explanations, they insist in applying reform policies where the guiding thread is the introduction of a certain market logic to *awaken the lazy elephant* in the state's education system. At the other end, proponents explain instead *the education issue* by affirming that the problem with public schools is its lack of funding.

From that perspective, the problem of schools are low investments from public education, which gathers the majority of the new generations from the most impoverished homes in society.

The author of this book is not satisfied with either explanation and proposes to examine in further detail the social-historical factors that contribute to explain *the crisis of contemporary schools.* From this point of view, the contribution of classical and contemporary sociology may significantly help to rationalize the debate and find effective strategies to take action and improve education for everyone.

Structure and Content of the Book

Social structure, schooling, and the reproduction of inequalities

The complex relation between schooling and the production and reproduction of social inequalities is a central topic in contemporary sociological research.

Little is known of the associations between the many dimensions of poverty, exclusion and discrimination, on the one hand, and the school experiences of boys, girls and teenagers, on the other. Statistical studies also show that certain relations exist between specific institutional characteristics

and the production of unequal learning results. But the existence of those associations is not greatly telling of how or why those relations are observed. It is thus important to continue studying the processes that produce and reproduce cultural and social hierarchies.

Everything seems to indicate that social conditions partly determine families' strategies to face those hierarchies while in turn contributing to reproduce inequalities. It is when new generations inherit a certain cultural capital, and where several social reproduction strategies unfold, schooling being one of them. Nonetheless, studies on this issue are scarce and, as a consequence, the resources used by families to keep and improve their social status vis-a-vis that of their offspring in the future are not known deeply enough. Evidently, not all families are able to carry out successful strategies in that sense. Those who manage to do so, even when they explicitly embrace the motivations of an egalitarian society, may be contributing unintentionally to the widening of inequalities through their objective practices and strategies when choosing, for example, public or private institutions that guarantee higher distinction for their children.

At the same time, schools create inequality through their own internal devices and processes. As an example, we may refer to the mostly subtle, tacit but effective mechanism that school directors use to select their students and which contribute to segregation in schools (when they create homogeneous schools based on students' social characteristics), which affects the children of the least favored sectors. On the other hand, teachers' own perceptions and expectations that contribute to producing the well-known *Pygmalion effect* when not controlled, or the self-realized prophecies that also end up favoring the failure of students whose culture is farther away from the logics of the official curriculum. Assessment and passing practices also impact school success and failure. Most institutions' assessments aim at sanctioning, that is, reward and punish students, generally based on an examination of their results which only allows them to know their performance and set meritocratic classifications that end up producing fair inequalities. In the future, it is desirable that research contribute to shed light on those neglected dimensions of the inequality production and reproduction processes. Deeper knowledge of those dimensions may allow for the implementation of less idealist equality policies but more effective ones, no longer to eradicate inequalities, but to progressively minimize them through time.

Schools and citizenship education in the 21st century

Beyond the construction of less unequal societies, schooling's goal was always to *educate citizens* who, in addition to existing with their particular identities, must be in shape to live in community among diversity. A citizenship pedagogy must have as point of departure the practical recognition of new generations being active subjects entitled to effective rights. **The traditional model of moral and political education based on the tryptic *order, prohibition, sanction* as a mechanism ensuring that the rule would be interiorized ought to be left behind.** Nowadays, students are not someone expected to obey, but are considered active agents of the process of production and reproduction of the political tradition and culture of a certain society. In that way, children and youth do not *inherit* a community's public morals and public culture,

but they incorporate them in a practical way through the set of lived experiences that they themselves construct along with representatives of the adult world in concrete school situations.

What strategies can be used to go from a student as a passive recipient of a set of assumptions for public action to a student as co-producer of a revamped democratic political culture? In what follows, I will allow myself to suggest three main lines of action that are only instructions of a way to pave and not of a scheme or recipe to put into practice.

a) The development of expression competencies among new generations. Broadly speaking, expression competencies – that is, oral, written, aesthetic, corporal – are not only instruments to communicate but, above all, to think, reflect, and reason. And those with greater expressive capital within them think more and better. To become autonomous subjects, individuals must have the necessary resources to put their emotions, desires, needs, and demands into words.

Schools can contribute to developing the gift of expressivity (knowing how to speak, knowing how to write, knowing how to understand what is said, and knowing how to decipher written texts) among subjects. But technical competencies must be accompanied by the firm belief that we all have the right to speak, that is, to express ourselves. Many children and adolescents (as well as many adults) remain silent not because they do not have the necessary technical competencies to express themselves, but because the idea that they have the right to speak and take the floor is not embedded in them. Those excluded from words (generally those excluded from other strategic material goods as well) are doomed to the unconditional delegation mechanism and, as such, become a force at the service of alien interests.

b) Another strategy that schooling may use to educate active citizens is providing new generations with systematic experiences of democratic life. Human rights and the rights of the child must not become only another point to be covered in school. Teachers, as representatives of the adult world, must lead and set the first limits for discussion around the need of a common representation of justice as an inevitable requirement towards a democratic life together. It must be clear that, in this case, socialization is not a synonym for adaptation to society.

Experiencing desirable rights and values through concrete situations – participating in school life councils, the creation of the institutional project, conflict resolution, team work, debates and collective argumentation – is likely to allow for the development of a practical sense of ethics, understood as a set of assumptions to act in a fair and respectful way towards differences, which students will be able to transfer to other spheres of their current or future lives.

c) Last, schools can and must offer opportunities to assimilate those democracy and moral concepts and theories which have been constructed throughout the history of societies. Those theories must also become powerful tools to foster reflection. Beyond concepts, we must transfer the knowledge of the legal devices that regulate modern democratic regimes. Citizens must be familiar with the functioning logic of the State powers, electoral systems, civil political and social rights, so that these become

resources to be used individually or collectively in social life. Those rights must be part of the school curriculum so that students not only know about them, but can also demand their effective fulfillment.

From critical pedagogy to a critique of pedagogy

Traditional pedagogic culture has at least two qualities. One is positive- it was always critical and nonconforming with dominant educational practices. The so-called contemporary *critical pedagogy* is nothing but a concrete case of that general stream. But, and this is the second quality, that will to change and improve, truly radical and revolutionary in many cases, is not usually accompanied by an interest to know the mechanisms and logic to produce and reproduce the educational realities that it intends to transform. Usually, pedagogy criticizes and proposes intervention programs, but it remains relatively uninterested in understanding what factors produce the results considered wanting from the viewpoint of education's general goals (educating free, autonomous, creative, participatory human beings). Indignation, projects and ideals are not enough to transform. Understanding routines, resistances, automations, is necessary to change reality, both at the level of schools' material conditions and their functioning, as well as within the mentalities, appreciations, and interests of school agents. If what they *do* in the classroom, a theory of practice is necessary that takes into account both dimensions. Otherwise, we will end up implementing partial *structural reform* policies, such as changes in education law or education funding, or *subjectivity reform* policies, such as the basic and continuing education of teachers or *conscientization* workshops.

The role that education science – like almost all human sciences – should play is precisely to get a better grasp of institutional logics, practices and school agents, to understand what factors contribute to reproduce undesirable routines, and what factors encourage creativity, imagination and, as such, promote change and transformation. A struggle between both forces arises in every social space. If we understand that struggle, we may be able to strengthen change, conservation or restoration dynamics. Otherwise, the most beautiful educational syllabuses will remain in the Tower of All Pure Ideas, while the reality of schools will continue being shaped by routine and tradition.

Last, ideals must also come along with the development of strategies, technology, processes, techniques, in sum, with a *know how* that can only be achieved through action research and experimenting. In other words, in the field of pedagogy, there is no balance between how education is, must be, and how to go about it.

In pedagogy, experts and specialists cannot be the only ones who produce technological scientific knowledge, but also mixed teams comprising classroom teachers and professors. These must stop being objects of research to become protagonists in the production of education's scientific and technological knowledge. They possess a type of knowledge that can only be produced in practice, but that we must re-appraise and integrate to the knowledge produced in education science by resorting to objectivity and perspective.

In sum, transforming education needs at least these basic requirements: a) explicitly adhering to a set of values such as the right to schooling and the right to powerful knowledge; b) solid knowledge about the logics between reality and education;

c) a set of technological resources suitable to achieving goals, and d) clear political will to carry out the necessary transformations (including the allocation of the economic and material resources needed for them).

Conclusion: A word – or two – on globalization and education

For some time now, discussions have been taking place more insistently about tailoring national education systems to the so-called *globalization demands.* We will argue here that the globalization speech can be understood as a contemporary form of fundamentalism. According to the version developed by the most powerful western countries, that speech has two dimensions. The first one is ethnocentrism, existing as a trend in almost all cultures, which consists of believing that one's own culture is the *real* culture, especially when compared to others' culture. The second one is its conquering pursuit, that is, the will to impose that own culture, given its *objective* superiority, and even for *other people's sake.*

When globalization is discussed in the education sphere, the ultimate goal is to impose a certain culture that may well be called *cosmopolitan*, with the aim of educating world citizens, who put down no roots in any particular place. That ambition that goes along with cultural globalization is nothing more than the universalization of certain particular interests erected upon the general value pattern of all knowledge and all national cultures and traditions.

The globalizing discourse arises as well as a result of an inexorable objective evolution which aims at becoming as strong as the laws of nature. In this way, it hides the fact that the globalizing project is the result of strategies and relations between forces whose entire interest is to *globalize* against those forces showing resistance and suggesting another form of internationalism that values and does not favor the destruction of national and particular cultures. The task of national education systems is to promote dialogue between cultures, out of which something similar to the idea of universal can emerge. We are citizens of a place, of a territory, we speak a language, we value the contents of that language understood as culture made of knowledge, wisdom and beauty, which we must appreciate, to then open up to other cultures, listen to their voices and enrich ourselves through them.

Indeed, new generations must not learn to socialize based on globalizing fundamentalism. On the contrary, **school systems must provide future citizens with those conceptual tools that will allow them to see what the ideology of globalization systematically hides from them, especially its political dimension**. Indeed, under the competitiveness discourse, there is a call to include in the school curriculum those skills and abilities that enable new generations to adapt to a world that is far from ideal. We will have to teach that globalization has (few) winners and (many) losers, and that it implies a permanent process of power and wealth concentration, both material – that is, technological and military – and symbolic (the capacity to impose *real* visions of the world).

Public schooling is one of the few social institutions capable of counteracting and showing resistance to the arrogance shown by globalizing fundamentalism. To do so, it should equip new generations with the necessary tools that allow them to critically defend themselves against the multiple forms of symbolic dominations of which they are and will be object.

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