

The education concept and its false dichotomies

El concepto de educación y sus falsas dicotomías

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Abstract

Introduction: The conceptual complexity inherent in the term “education” has been associated with numerous analyses from various disciplinary approaches, paradigms, and theoretical currents. **Objective:** This article aims not to offer a univocal definition of the meaning of education but to consider it from a sociological perspective that integrates the false dichotomies of individual/society, continuity/discontinuity, and reproduction/change. **Development:** In the first part, the text presents a theoretical proposal on the articulation between culture, identity, and memory. Culture is understood as the set of objectified and subjectivized forms in historically specific contexts, which provides the individual with intersubjective elements for identity formation, where memory acts as an active dialogue between the psycho-individual and the socio-collective dimension. In the second part, education is proposed as a complex and dynamic process of cultural communication, identity formation, and social construction of memory. It emphasizes the importance of analyzing education from a theoretical perspective that considers the interaction between the individual and society, offering the possibility to understand its crucial role in processes of social reproduction and continuity, as well as in those of change and discontinuity. **Conclusions:** The mentioned false dichotomies in approaches to studying education polarize and create an antagonism between structures and subjects, individual and society, and reproduction and social change, consequently providing little understanding of how these phenomena articulate with educational processes, overlooking the multiple possibilities of co-participation and mutual determination.

Key words: education; culture; identity; memory.

Resumen

Introducción: La complejidad conceptual que entraña el término “educación” ha estado asociado con numerosos análisis provenientes de diversos enfoques disciplinarios, paradigmas y corrientes teóricas. **Objetivo:** Este artículo, más que ofrecer una definición unívoca del significado de la educación, propuso pensarla desde una perspectiva sociológica que integrara las falsas dicotomías de individuo/sociedad, continuidad/discontinuidad, y reproducción/cambio. **Desarrollo:** En la primera parte, el texto expuso una propuesta teórica sobre la articulación entre cultura, identidad y memoria. La cultura entendida como el conjunto de formas objetivadas y subjetivadas en contextos históricamente específicos, que provee al sujeto de los elementos intersubjetivos para su formación identitaria, donde la memoria funge como un diálogo activo entre la dimensión psico-individual y la socio-colectiva. En la segunda parte se propuso la comprensión de la educación como un proceso complejo y dinámico de comunicación de la cultura, de formación de la identidad y de construcción social de la memoria. Se enfatizó la importancia de analizar la educación desde una visión teórica que considerara la interacción entre individuo y sociedad, y que ofreciera la posibilidad de entender su crucial papel en los procesos de reproducción y continuidad social, así como en los de cambio y discontinuidad. **Conclusiones:** Las falsas dicotomías mencionadas para las aproximaciones en el estudio de la educación polarizan y generan un antagonismo entre estructuras y sujetos, individuo y sociedad, y reproducción y cambio social, lo que en consecuencia proporciona poco entendimiento sobre la manera en que estos fenómenos se articulan con los procesos educativos, soslayando las múltiples posibilidades de coparticipación y determinación mutua.

Palabras clave: educación; cultura; identidad; memoria.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the concept of education is inseparable from the analysis of the social conditions in which it takes place. From a sociological perspective, the understanding of education is often related to the function attributed to it or to the ideal component of what it aims to achieve. That is why, historically, this term has been linked both to the language of everyday use and to the scientific approach whose theoretical and methodological approaches, although they have contributed to its theoretical construction, have also imposed interpretative limits, among which stands out the fact of analyzing education polarized (individual/society; continuity/discontinuity; reproduction/change) since such positioning constitutes a false antagonism that provides little understanding of the dynamics between contexts, subjects, structures, and social processes.

In this sense, reworking the concept of education is unavoidable in the context of contemporary reality permeated by broad processes of cultural globalization, technological transformations, and identity-based social movements, spatiotemporal coordinates that assign different purposes to education. In this scenario, a theoretical and conceptual reformulation of education is essential, in dialogue with existing definitions and the face of the social challenges around culture, identity, and memory.

To guide the reflection, the concepts of culture, identity, and memory are presented as critical concepts necessary to think about education. In the second part, it is proposed to understand education as a complex psychosocial process of communication of culture, identity formation, and social construction of memory; this is based on two key elements that will be addressed simultaneously: a) the theoretical complementarity of the previously established categories of culture, identity, and memory; and b) an integrative approach that overcomes the false dichotomies that have historically been developed to define education, namely, individual/society, continuity/discontinuity, and reproduction/change.

Specifically, we insist on making explicit the crucial role of education in the interaction between individual and society, in the active dynamics of the processes of identity formation

that integrate both continuity and discontinuity and in the forms of construction of social memory, its structures and processes of reproduction and social change.

DEVELOPMENT

Culture, identity and memory: key concepts for education

Culture

Although the concept of culture has a long historical construction, it is interesting to note that, in the broadness of the term, it is related to an idea of the human product and that, in turn, it shapes subjects.

various socio-historical contexts that give it meaning, validity, and legitimacy. To mention a few examples, it has been defined from an elitist perspective linked to the idea of heritage or collective collection of valuable works and objects of the past from an aesthetic, scientific, or spiritual point of view or from a historical-evolutionary perspective where culture, understood as “civilization,” is subject to a process of linear evolution by defined and obligatory chronological stages through which all peoples should pass, even when the rhythms and speeds are different; and yet another, from a culturalist perspective, the result of the convergence between ethnology and the behavioral psychology of learning (Giménez, 1982). As can be seen, these definitions are developed from an objectivist approach to culture.

Giménez (2002) offers a strategy of thought and theoretical construction on culture to integrate both the objectivist approach to culture and the subjectivist approach since the latter, according to the author, ends up psychologizing cultural processes to reduce them to models of behavior framed in everyday life, and in the ordinary sense expressed in specific and concrete situations. In this context, it is possible to understand culture as the social organization -always historically contextualized and socially structured- of the processes of internalization and symbolic construction carried out by both individual subjects and social groups. Through this interaction, the objectified forms of culture (which include, for example, cultural heritage,

historical memory, museums, archaeological sites, historical events, and characters, among others) go through a process of subjectivization in which the subjects actively (and according to their experiences, attitudes, emotions, values, mental schemes, among others), elaborate diverse strategies to determine their appropriation and resignification (Giménez, 2005, p. 489).

Therefore, culture can be understood as a notion with several dimensions, spheres, or levels such as material culture, set of cultural knowledge, institutions and social organization, worldview, and communicative practices; that is, everything that contributes to subjects adapting to their natural and social environment, giving meaning to their individual and collective life, and through communicative praxis, understanding, producing, transmitting and re-signifying their existence.

A possible theorization on culture, conceived from a socio-historical perspective that integrates both objective and subjective components, should not overlook the fact that the category culture is a carrier of open contents related to the following notions: (a) a dynamic construction in continuous change and interaction with other cultures, (b) the social organization and internalization of meanings in a double dimension both individual and collective, (c) the set of objectified and subjectified forms in historically specific contexts, and above all, (d) the communicative praxis between individual, society, and societies in dialectical terms.

Identity

According to Giménez (2009, p. 11), subjects construct their identity from culture, specifically, the cultural materials communicated through social practices and processes that allow them to distinguish themselves from others. In this sense, identity is constructed intersubjectively since, on the one hand, it is “felt and lived” and, on the other hand, “externally recognized” by the social actors who interact with each other in the various social scenarios. In this way, identity integrates what is “socially shared” - highlighting the similarities resulting from belonging to groups and other collectives - and the elements of what is considered “individually unique” - emphasizing difference. Hence, the collective and the individual configure both dimensions of identity since they are “closely related to constitute the unique, albeit multidimensional, identity of the individual subject” (p. 13).

Distinguishing methodologically between the individual dimension and the collective dimension of identity has theoretical implications, among which stands out the warning to avoid conceptualizing collective identity in psycho-individual terms since it is not possible to define it as a homogeneous or perfectly delimited entity (Giménez, 2009). Although identity and culture continuously interact, one is not reduced to the other. In other words, the fact that identity is constituted based on cultural references transmitted through social practices does not imply that, if culture is transformed, the identity of those who construct such culture also changes mechanically. On the contrary, it is necessary to consider sufficiently the socio-historical influences in the process of development of identity formation (personal and collective) since this is generated in the daily social interactions that subjects have with each other, and it is through them that they take up psycho-individual and socio-collective elements to reformulate themselves.

Likewise, the distinction between the individual and the collective dimension favors understanding the processes of continuity and discontinuity in constructing identity. The link between individual and society is consolidated in terms of the construction of a feeling of identity continuity and a sense of social belonging, elements closely related to social interactions, to the macro and micro social context, to the cultural boundaries that distinguish subjects from others, and also to the process of regulation and self-regulation of individual behavior, since all these are aspects that have a significant influence on the subject in the identity process. It is worth adding that this dynamic also includes the processes of discontinuity or identity reconstruction, that is, the subject’s active participation, his intention, and his interest in distinguishing himself and demarcating his self-ascription about the elements that integrate his hetero-ascription. Thus, identity can be defined as “a subjective (and frequently self-reflective) process by which subjects define their difference from other subjects (and from their social environment) through the self-assignment of a repertoire of cultural attributes frequently valued and relatively stable over time (Giménez, 2009, p. 12).

Memory

Historically, memory has been a constant concern for humanity; intrigued to know what and how people remember, why they forget, and

why sometimes some memories seem false. In their eagerness to answer these questions, some sciences have defined memory as a psychic faculty immersed in mental and cognitive processes; thus, sciences such as psychology, medicine, psychiatry, neurosciences, and psychoanalysis have focused their attention on the chemical, biological, and synaptic components of memory and its relationship with the emotional and affective factors of memory, forgetting and trauma.

On the other hand, there are other studies related to the influence of society on memory, which is considered a cultural and political concern of contemporary societies. In this context, memory is a subject of interest to anthropologists, political scientists, sociologists, historians, and philosophers, who also analyze the relationship between individual, collective, and historical memory.

Since 1925, Maurice Halbwachs has emphasized the social dimension of memory and remembrance processes, stressing the importance of sociocultural factors in constructing an individual's memories. For Halbwachs (1995), memory is an event or testimony of the past whose social nature has implications both in content and form, that is, what is remembered and how it is remembered. Thus, according to the author, in addition to remembering characters, places, and events with the help of the memories of others, individuals remember in a context of shared cultural codes. Recognizing such sociocultural dynamics clarifies two essential characteristics of memory: its patrimonial character and its role in social reproduction. This is because memory impacts generational processes of socialization and the direct or indirect transmission of the cultural contents that shape it.

From a sociocultural approach that recognizes the active role of memory, Jelin (2002) understands it as a work of selection and reconstruction of the past that arises with a psychological and social purpose in the present and as a function of a desired future. Therefore, the author mentions that the past that is remembered or forgotten is always activated from a specific present and as a function of certain future expectations. Whether at the individual level or in collective interaction, in the micro or macro social dimension, "For there are moments or junctures of activation of particular memories, and others of silences or forgetfulness (p. 18).

Hence, the individual and the social, the past and the present, continuity and discontinuity, and reproduction and change are incorporated in constructing memory in terms of complementarity rather than opposition.

The complementarity between reproduction and social change in the construction of memory warns that the latter cannot simply be "poured" into someone's mentality in the present, for memory is not preserved intact but is reconstructed from the present. In this sense, the reconstruction of memory does not explain the past reality but the truth of the present, as society and individuals construct it.

Furthermore, the complementary relationship between reproduction and change contains some implications for memory; among them is that individual memory cannot be signified by ignoring the sociohistorical context and social frameworks since these are structural factors that drive and delimit the emergence of particular memories, such as the set of common sense knowledge that allows the understanding of reality and the general ideas of society.

Thus, individual memory can only be signified with recourse to its social context of emergence since it can only be recognized and reconstructed in this way. However, individual memory functions as a continuous process of filtering multiple collective memories, which, although they have elements in common among their members, do not necessarily have the same meaning for all. Such memories will appear with greater or lesser intensity for each of the members of a social group and manifest themselves in individual actions and statements. Collective memory condenses individual memories but does not absorb them into a homogeneous whole or in a problematic manner; on the contrary, the individual memories that manage to penetrate the conformation of collective memory change form and content to the extent that they are positioned in a whole that is no longer a personal consciousness (Halbwachs, 1991, p. 6).

Without ignoring that the mnemonic faculty requires access to information as a result of molecular-cellular mechanisms, protein synthesis, and brain activities, memory is more than the faithful recording and mechanical reproduction of the past; it is a sociocultural construction of meaning about the past, a continuous dialogue between the psycho-individual and the socio-collective

(Segura, 2023). The complementary relationship between reproduction and change is concretized in the course of socialization processes (education, for example) and, in particular, in other institutionalized and reproductive group practices (for example, in school) where subjects are provided with a sense of continuity (Segura, 2023).

A conceptual proposal on education, or on the false dichotomies in the analysis of education.

In everyday life, the word education is part of the interpretation with which subjects explain their reality and act in it. As a concept, education has an exciting historicity that refers to its diverse meanings, displacements, and conceptual changes, hence the existence of diverse ways of conceiving it and, even more, carrying it out.

In general terms, it is possible to identify some meanings attributed to education, such as, for example, being a broad social process, a social practice, a social institution, the result or product of an action, the means to achieve an end, a sociocultural phenomenon, and a planned and intentional action (Sarramona, 2000). On the other hand, the term education has a wealth of meanings used to refer to the different dimensions of education, which adds a certain complexity to determine its meaning; among these meanings are terms such as teaching, learning, knowledge, training, curriculum, model, approach, study, study, teaching, didactics, school, and many more. Likewise, from the critical/utopian component of the meaning attributed to education, it is possible to identify specific complementary characteristics in terms of “educational intentionality,” for example, reproductive, transformative, traditional, progressive, humanist, emancipatory, democratic, intercultural, patrimonial, inclusive, environmental, emotional, to mention a few.

This section proposes to understand education as a complex psychosocial process of a) communication of culture, b) identity formation, and c) social construction of memory. To this end, the theoretical complementarity of the previously established categories of culture, identity, and memory is recovered, and a critical analysis is made of the false dichotomies in the analysis of education, namely, individual/society, continuity/discontinuity, and reproduction/change.

Education as communication of culture or on the false dichotomy of individual/society

Education understood as a process of communication of culture, is the leading resource of the individual to make contact with his or her environment; this is achieved through social relations, social practices, and the complex construction processes of social senses and meanings in historically specific contexts. Thus, education operates as a practice and a social process whose dynamics encompass socialization and individualization processes.

Regarding the relationship between education and socialization processes, the latter includes the transmission of cultural contents through the broad educational processes that make possible the incorporation of the individual into society; that is, it refers to the immediate social dimension of culture. At the same time, the processes of individualization are inscribed in the individual dimension since they refer to the modes of appropriation, production, reproduction, or transformation of culture by the subject (Dávila, 1990). Thus, the educational and communicative praxis between subject, society, and societies is manifested in dialectical terms and a complementary manner: on the one hand, as communication and transmission of the culture of a given collective or society to its members, and on the other hand, assimilation and transformation of society by those who are part of it (Segura, 2023, p. 53).

It is worth adding that education, understood as communication of culture, is developed both in its daily and institutional and schooled dimension; the former refers to the broad social practices and processes of intermittent character, while the latter, the institutional, corresponds to a non-neutral institutionalized product, but rather, a school institution whose goals and values come from the link with its context, and for the achievement of specific objectives that contain a particular social and political vision, implicit or explicit.

The dynamic between both dimensions of education, the social and the institutional, links the individual with society and socio-collective regulation with the self-regulation of individual and daily behavior. In other words, the educational practices of communication of culture where

individual and society interact make evident the coexistence of individual phenomena of interpretation of reality, with the need to search for meaning and sociocultural belonging. Hence, education has a fundamental role in identity formation at the individual and collective level.

Education as identity formation, or the false dichotomy of continuity/discontinuity

There is a certain consensus that identity formation constitutes one of the significant goals of education. Currently, the educational concern for identity is developing in a socio-historical context that addresses identity in difference or as a weapon for the decolonization of culture and thought amid processes of cultural globalization that call for the defense and affirmation of identity through education.

Although some programs of educational institutions promote these identity objectives, they are only effective if the social actors internalize them and construct their meaning. In other words, the school institution alone cannot determine and configure a specific identity since, as mentioned above, there is no linear or mechanical imposition of cultural traits from a group on an individual, free from resignification and re-appropriation. Therefore, identity is not an already constituted datum nor a fixed entity; it is a process of constant collaboration.

The recognition of the social, historical, and cultural dimensions of identity must be complemented with the analysis of its psycho-individual dimension; that is, the understanding of identity as a multidimensional phenomenon where the configuration of the cultural references and memories that constitute it are in permanent resignification due to the incorporation of new interpretative schemes resulting from experience. Hence, education and the school institution are inserted in a dynamic between continuity and discontinuity in forming identity.

Education, both as a social practice and process and as an institutionalized product, communicates cultural contents in the form of a social memory that constitutes a form of cultural heritage; this memory is a fundamental component of identity because both memories and the meaning given to them are necessarily a shared action between individuals and societies, within the framework of educational practices in a specific time and space. Education, then, forms

the basis of identity since it can encompass individual memory with collective and historical memory, enabling the subject to appropriate a shared and collective past that creates an idea of continuity, which, in turn, allows a specific projection into the future. However, the construction of identity is not reduced to the accumulation and reproduction of collective and historical memory since this does not determine the absolute significance of the subject; on the contrary, thanks to the psychic becoming of the subject, new meanings are created for memories, and new memories to create meaning in the present. This dynamic between continuity and discontinuity is necessary to give certainty - albeit temporarily - to the self of what it is not and, in turn, to build and act in consequence of what it believes to be, in a permanent effort of "pact of recognition with the world" (Ramirez, 2017, p. 196).

Education is a social construction of memory or about the false dichotomy of reproduction/change.

Although some contributions of the theories of reproduction analyzed from the sociology of education are valid to analyze the false dichotomy between cultural reproduction and social change, here, the specific role of education in the social construction of memory is of interest for the following reasons: first, because of the socializing function of education; second, because the school is a privileged institution for the transmission and reproduction of the cultural contents of a society; and third, because social memory has a patrimonial character whose intergenerational dynamics is neither linear nor free of tensions.

Social memory comprises a set of specific cultural contents that, when transmitted through socialization and schooling, make possible the incorporation of individuals into society. These contents function as social and cultural references of a patrimonial nature, highlighting events, people, and places whose particularity is that they can be known, individually or collectively, and directly or indirectly through educational practices. The recognition of this social dynamic makes it possible to understand how education is linked to memory in its sense of sociocultural reproduction, that is, "how a society classifies, transmits and evaluates educational knowledge reflecting power and its distribution, as well as the given principles of control" (Avila, 2005, p.

160). This reproductive function of education is carried out through the selection, teaching, and learning of specific cultural knowledge and forms of construction of a specific social memory, with identifiable purposes that imply a particular vision of historical processes and events and not another.

However, the educational processes of communication of culture and the construction of social memory are more comprehensive than cultural and intergenerational transmission. The construction of social memory is not limited to a definable and mechanical transmission of memories, cultural contents, and intergenerational memories; according to Bourdieu (2002), to understand it in this way would imply thinking of youth in singular as something homogeneous, attached to a deterministic way of conceptualizing it as a period of life subject to a process of linear evolution, in stages, and whose finality would be adulthood.

Articulating educational practices with the social construction of memory in a broader context of social structures and processes clarifies the meanings constructed about the past. Education, in addition to reproducing social memory, reveals the value, scope, and impact of its potential for change as it articulates the instituted and socially inherited memory of adult generations, with a work of selection and reconstruction of the younger generations on the meanings attributed to the past; this dynamic incorporates the subjects as an active part of the memory they construct with a potential for transformation and change (Segura, 2023).

In the relationship between education and reproduction/change, memory constitutes the cultural, identity, material, and symbolic foundation that enables the processes of both transmission and cultural exchange between generations, as well as transformation and change due to its ability to preserve and create new cultural meanings (Ricaurte, 2014, p. 31).

Contribution to knowledge

Educational research concerning memory and its link with education has focused its efforts on addressing the experiences linked to the educational transmission of violent and conflictive pasts, from an ethical and pedagogical perspective, of the duty to transmit such memory to avoid repeating the facts. However, the cultural and identity elements presented here have been

overlooked in their analysis as false dichotomies. This promotes a more inclusive theoretical perspective to address the relationship between memory and education.

Limitations of the study

This text is an initial descriptive review of a subject that needs to be expanded to specify, for example, the differentiated dynamics between social education and school education in the communication of culture, the formation of identity, and the social construction of memory.

CONCLUSIONS

As seen in this essay, the analysis of immediate categories such as culture, identity, and memory is inherent and necessary to the concept of education since the implicit or explicit meaning of these categories depends on the educational proposals and the purposes historically attributed to education.

The critical consideration expressed in this essay through false dichotomies demonstrates that the role of education and educational processes can be rethought in broader terms. After all, the potential of education lies in its function of communicating cultural contents that help to give meaning both to individual and collective identity in the present, as well as to the social, political, and cultural conditions of an individual or society.

The intersubjective nature of education implies communication and negotiation, that is, continuities and discontinuities in resignifying the transmitted cultural contents and, therefore, of the identity processes and forms of memory promoted. In this sense, it is essential to recognize that the articulation of education with culture, identity, and memory obeys, on the one hand, the demands of the present and, on the other, a conception of education, society, and the subject. It is no longer only a question of questioning the relationships between the individual and the social, between continuity and discontinuity, and between reproduction and change, but also the capacity to analyze the role of education in the process of building memories and communicating cultural references with the capacity to form identities; that is, the capacity

to integrate the processes of reconstruction of the most subjective and singular, with that which becomes culture and historical memory.

Recommendations

Although this analysis needs to be expanded, it represents an invitation to think about culture, identity, and memory immersed in educational processes, in the changes of society, in the dynamics occurring among social meanings, and in the life trajectories of the subjects, because what is education if not communication of culture, formation of identity and social construction of memory?

Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest

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