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Foucault and education.
Some key aspects of Foucauldian thought applied to education

Foucault i edukacja.
Zastosowanie niektórych teorii Foucaulta dla zrozumienia współczesnej edukacji

Abstract

The huge possibilities Michel Foucault and his work afford us as heuristic tools help us to use his theory as a theoretical framework and to understand the educational situation of our times. The aim of this paper is to highlight some analysis concepts and categories from Foucault's work to discern their light and shade and pave the way for new research interested in using this conceptual 'toolbox'.

Keywords: education, theory Michel Foucault, school culture.

Streszczenie

Michel Foucault i jego praca oferują narzędzie heurystyczne dające ogromne możliwości wykorzystania jego teorii jako ram teoretycznych i zrozumienia sytuacji edukacyjnej naszych czasów. Celem tego artykułu jest zwrócenie uwagi na niektóre pojęcia i kategorie analityczne definiowane przez Foucaulta, wskazanie ich zalet i niedoskonałości oraz przygotowanie sposobu nowego podejścia przez zainteresowanych wykorzystaniem tego konceptualnego „zestawu narzędzi".

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja, teoria Michela Foucaulta, kultura szkolna.

Introduction: on discipline and power

Education is a phenomenon with clear links to the three main themes of Foucault's work: knowledge, subjectivity and power. But one concept in Foucault's work that clearly stands out as related to the past and current educational system is *discipline*. *Discipline* is understood as control, submission, subordination and passivity to control young school children. Although these discipline practices are individualising practices, they also hierarchise, link young people together, produce facts, dominate the subject and result in the 'truth'.

Discipline cannot be identified with either an institution or an apparatus. It is a type of power, a way of exercising it, involving a set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a 'physics' or an 'anatomy' of power, a technology[1].

Discipline is considered a type of power practised on bodies to train them with strict techniques, such as surveillance, penalty and examination, which are applied by institutions. This involves a series of discourses in which the person is taught how to think and how to act. Consequently, individuals are controlled and selected to form a highly specific model of citizen.

Foucault tells us that school discipline forms individuals and guides them towards knowledge of themselves, to determine their potential and thus be able to develop and obtain their own benefits. That is why discipline is a form of exercising power, of impacting on power relationships. Thus, discipline is used as a type of power to guide and orientate bodies, instilling in them how to act in different situations; this knowledge is later seen in their personal, employment and social relationships.

We must not forget that the human body is always involved in a disciplinary system that is seen permanently at home, at university, in hospital, prison or anywhere else where there are power relationships and control systems. Throughout individuals' education they are subject to disciplines that shape and instruct them, places where they are constantly assessed and faced with the rules governing society, a Panopticon:

> The Panopticon was a ring-shaped place in the middle of which was a courtyard with a tower in the centre. The ring was divided into small cells overlooking the interior and exterior and in each of these small cells, depending on the institution's objectives, there was a child learning to write, a workman working, a prisoner atoning for his sins, a madman updating his madness, etc. There was a guard in the central tower and as each cell overlooked the exterior and interior at the same time, the guard's gaze could see through the entire cell; there was no point of shade and, therefore, everything the individual did was exposed to the gaze of the observing guard[2].

For Foucault, panopticism and discipline were related. The Panopticon serves a disciplinary society, a society in which we are watched daily, in which we face powers and micropowers; and if we act against them, or make a mistake that compromises the integrity of established societies, we will be judged and punished so we can be educated and corrected.

The spatial distribution inside a classroom, school in general, also adopts the panoptic system: the teacher is at the front of the class facing all the students to

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[1] M. Foucault, *La verdad y las formas jurídicas*, Editorial Gedisa, Rio de Janeiro 1978, 54.

[2] On *panopticism* in M. Foucault, *Discipline and punish*, Pantheon Books, London 1977, 196.

ensure visual control of them. The Panopticon is a specific means of visibility that consists of aligning the architectural space so that individuals are immersed in an institutionalised discipline seeking total visibility of all their movements.

On surveillance, examination and control in school

If we follow Foucauldian thought, spaces in schools are arranged more subtly by being divided into zones; every young person has their place and every location has its individual. The disciplinary space tends to be divided into as many lots as there are bodies or elements to apportion[3].

In the obligatory alignments – rows, classes based on age groups, grades – every student already occupies one order or another based on their age, their abilities and their behaviour. They move nonstop through a series of boxes that mark a hierarchy of knowledge or ability. By allocating individual places, the modern school has made it possible to control everyone and all their simultaneous work. We could say that it has completely individualised space to better control students and it has organised a new economy of learning time. It has made the school space operate as a machine of learning, but also of surveillance, hierarchisation and recompense. According to Foucault, school has sought to ensure individuals are obedient.

Furthermore, in school, examination is a device that controls and penalises through everyone perpetually being compared to each other, which makes it possible to measure and penalise. Examination places individuals in a field of surveillance. This entire system depends on control: the disciplined child's entire activity must be regulated and sustained by categorical orders whose effectiveness lies in brevity and clarity. The order does not need to be explained or made; it just has to produce the desired behaviour. Consequently, students must have learned the code of signals and respond automatically to them all.

The concept of discipline enabled Foucault to connect changes that occurred at a microphysical level; the training of bodies, the gestures and behaviour of subjects with transformations that took place at other levels, such as a new school organisation of space, time and activities.

We should not forget that although Foucault's books address specific issues, such as prison, sexuality, madness, clinics, etc., they also form part of major theoretical reflections that can be linked to a wider series associated with the critical analysis of the rationalities of power in the modern world. For Foucault, punishing the body has been replaced by punishing the soul. This punishment is no longer metered out directly on an individual's body, as instead it is deployed subtly by

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[3] M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France 1978–79*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 1988.

a series of specialists that judge, label and make decisions. When extrapolating this approach to the analysis of a school, punishment is likened to the work specialists, for example psychiatrists, psychologists and educators, perform with students. They become judges, assessors, agents of domination, instruments serving a power that oversees individuals' existence.

With Foucault we must understand discipline as 'a political anatomy of detail' in the scope of school education, as a way to channel behaviour. It places special emphasis on *little things*, on observing them to control and use people through 'the meticulousness of the regulations, the fussiness of the inspections, the supervision of the smallest fragment of life and of the body'[4]. The above-mentioned aspects highlight how discipline can manufacture an individuality. It is a new concept of humans, stemming from modernity, which it is supported by and feeds back to. It presents the four following characteristics, according to Foucault: 'it is cellular (by the play of spatial distribution), it is organic (by the coding of activities), it is genetic (by the accumulation of time), it is combinatory (by the composition of forces)'. That is why discipline is applied using four main techniques: 'it draws up tables; it prescribes movements; it imposes exercises; lastly, in order to obtain the combination of forces, it arranges "tactics" [...] the highest form of disciplinary practice'[5].

Disciplinary power, whose specific instrument is examination, plays a main role in correcting behaviour at school. That is why it makes use of instruments that are in principle very simple: hierarchical inspection, normalising penalty and examination itself. In other words, a device of hierarchical surveillance has to be activated to exercise this disciplinary power; consequently, school is a building that channels behaviour, a disciplinary institution that has become a control machine operating as a microscope of behaviour: a central point would be both a source of light illuminating everything and a locus of convergence for everything that must be known: a perfect eye that nothing would escape and a centre toward which all gazes would be turned[6].

As the analyses of Illich[7] or Bourdieu and Passeron[8] have already demonstrated, the school plays a fundamental 'custodial' role as a concentration or internment centre; it establishes its gaze through individuals for quite a considerable number of

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[4] M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France 1978–79*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 1988, 44.

[5] M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France 1978–79*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 1988, 172, 133.

[6] M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France 1978–79*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 1988, 178.

[7] I. Illich, *La sociedad desescolarizada*, Editorial Planeta, Mexico 1985.

[8] P. Bourdieu and J.C. Passeron, *La reproducción. Elementos para una teoría del sistema de enseñanza*, Editorial Laia, Barcelona 1979.

hours of their childhood and youth. Later, an educational role is added to the roles of surveillance, so that 'three procedures are integrated into a single mechanism: teaching proper, the acquisition of knowledge by the very practice of the pedagogical activity and, finally, a reciprocal and hierarchised observation'[9]. This reciprocal and hierarchised observation, discrete, continuous and overall surveillance of identified and specified individuals, expanded in modernity to multiple institutions due to the importance of the new power mechanics it involved.

On these mechanics of permanent and continuous power, the anthropologist Kluckhohn made his own an old North American proverb, which says that it is very difficult for a fish to be aware of the existence of water: 'the fish would be the last creature to discover water'[10]. But water does not cease existing as a result; quite the contrary, it surrounds it on all sides. The type of school Foucault speaks about is a glass cage in which the individual can be watched at all times[11].

On Foucault and his applications in the education sector

Foucault is a theoretical 'toolbox' for any social scientist; researchers can dip into the box and use what they need. However, we should remember, as Raimundo Cuesta mentioned, that many interpreters of the French thinker have fallen for the 'myth of coherence', in other words, they assume Foucault's work has a system and is completely cohesive, and that prevents us from clearly seeing the limitations and restrictions of his work. As Cuesta points out, we must approach Foucault 'with spiral, winding and retractable readings'.

Foucauldian theory must be an invitation to conceptual *do-it-yourself*. Olga Lucía Zuluaga understands Foucault in a less orthodox and more conscious manner, mentioning that 'when we make use of the Foucault name, we refer to a way of writing, interrogating, perceiving, thinking. Foucault is a perspective, a way of looking; it is the name given to a toolbox'[12].

Theory cannot become self-explanatory machinery that steamrolls over the researched subject because it came first and requires strict adherence; its sterility becomes obvious when meaning is hidden under artificial systematicity. Nevertheless, sometimes empirical work alone does not suffice to conduct an exhaustive investigation; when you turn up for research dressed in the theoretical bareness of

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[9] M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France 1978–79*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 1988, 181.

[10] C. Kluckhohn, *Initiation à l'anthropologie*, Dessart, Brussels 1966, 22.

[11] M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France 1978–79*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 1988, 185.

[12] O. Zuluaga, *Foucault. La pedagogía y la educación. Pensar de otro modo*, Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Bogotá 2005, 7.

empiricism, facts proliferate as a riot of capricious events that are impossible to understand and explain. In my opinion, social research must be balanced without too much formal baggage, but it must not be full of theoretical deficit either.

Foucault argues that *disciplinary power* came into being with the arrival of modern institutions and spread through modern society. Consequently, the continuities of power are not only evident in schools, hospitals and prisons, but also outside them. The concept of disciplinary power explicitly changed the analyses of power, from a *macro* framework of structures and ideologies to a *micro* environment of bodies and daily routines.

Foucault stated that 'in thinking of the mechanisms of power, I am thinking rather of its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives'.

In my opinion, we education theorists should find a greater diversity of methodological approaches, emphasising, as other specialists have recognised, that 'the way to approach this complexity does not consist of ignoring but rather making our analytical repertoire more sophisticated and even improving our ability to discover how power works, personality is caused or disciplinary matrices are legitimised'[13].

Mark Porter also draws our attention to this issue: 'Have we struggled with the problem of changes in mediations of language, analysis or voice in the world around us? And have we introduced problems arising from intellectual effort in our research of the past?... In this age, the discipline of history needs new cognitive maps, new analysis strategies and new thought experiments'[14].

We need to navigate the huge scenario of Foucauldian concepts and hypotheses with caution, be stripped of any fetishist adoration of the work and its author and make practical, yet creative use of his contributions; a theoretical toolbox that interested researchers can help themselves to. Foucault's writing allows us to choose from many different tools since many of his concerns are still ours, as are many of his contradictions.

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[13] J. Kincheloe, *Teachers as researchers. Qualitative inquiry as a path to empowerment*, Falmer Press, London 1991, 243.

[14] M. Porter, *Cultural history and postmodernity: disciplinary readings and challenges*, Columbia University Press, New York 1997, 91.

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