

GEOGRAPHICAL EDUCATION: PAST EXPERIENCE, CURRENT TRENDS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

Dear Readers,

I am greatly honored to present some of the principal contributions from researchers who participated in the *Rede de Investigação em Didática da Geografia (Investigation Network into the Didactic of Geography)*, at an event that took place at the University of São Paulo, Brazil, entitled *Colóquio Internacional de Investigadores em Didática da Geografia (International Colloquy of Investigators into the Didactic of Geography)* in the month of June 2010.

The history that precedes this event and its realization is justified by the need to consolidate ongoing research projects and which take place as a result of partnerships among some Latin American Universities, as well as strengthening a research network on Geographic Education and the Didactic of Geography in Brazil.

It was in the context of the meeting of learning and concern that took place at the XI Encontro de Geógrafos da América Latina –EGAL- (Meeting of Geographers of Latin America) - located in the city of Bogotá, Colombia, from the 26th. to the 30th. of March 2007, that REDLADGEO was set up with various Latin American researchers. The intention was to create real and virtual spaces in which to present the results of academic research and organize joint investigative projects to strengthen, in the countries of origin, the line of research in Geography Teaching/Geography Education. Therefore, the origin of the network is based on the interest expressed by Latin American academicians and institutions with a central preoccupation: the teaching of geography, its tendencies, problems and possibilities among others to amplify its field of incidence and participation to international level, reflection and theories that favor the permanent constructive action of researchers in Geography Education.

REDLADGEO (Red) defines axes of enquiry and work focused on scientific literacy and for citizenship, such as:

- the strengthening and examination of teacher training programs;
- advances in scientific investigation about geography education;
- incorporation of new technologies and virtual means in geography instruction, the promulgating of models and alternatives for the teaching and learning of geography;
- Production and innovation of didactic materials in a renewed meaningful school geography perspective.

The purpose of Red can be expressed as consolidating:

- Proposals for intervention in schools and consolidating existing fields in geography, as well as those that produce results from the dynamics and socio-territorial transformations.
- Socialize, elaborate and execute work on the Didactic in geography.
- Construct spaces of interaction and reflection from the investigations and enquiries around geographical Didactic as elaborated in each participating country
- Consolidate an academic community interested in the teaching and learning of geography in such a manner as to be able to consolidate meeting and reflection spaces and which will, in turn, contribute to the qualification of teachers and to academic collectivity and pedagogical interest in the theme.

In this sense, new paths are validated; the reading of socio-spatial reality is recognized, by means of languages and narratives, the use of thematic and cognitive cartography as a language to understand the relationship between local and global spaces as a manifestation of the geographic scale of analysis. Stimulating alliances and links between researchers who strengthen the formation and academic and pedagogical networks in Geography Education and which tend to consolidate investigation processes and scientific diffusion with an international character.

It was with these principals as a focus that we organized the first *Colóquio Internacional de Investigadores em Didática da Geografia* (International Colloquy of Investigators into the Didactic of Geography) linked to *REDLADGEO*, whose proposition was to give continuity to investigations and discussions already held in other academic meetings such as EGAL (Bogotá/2007 and Montevideo/2009) and in the *Seminário Internacional de Ensino de Geografia e Ciências* (International Seminary of the Teaching of Geography) in 2008, at the Faculty of Education of the University of São Paulo, Brazil.

The possibility of stimulating debate among the researchers and analyzing the current context of Geography Education in Latin America, Europe (Portugal and Spain) and the United States, contribute to the strengthening and deepening of discussions in this field of knowledge.

The anxiety and scholarship that arose in the meetings, seminars, colloquies stimulated a dialogue among academic peers that dealt with the theme of teaching and learning of geography, while at the same time we noted that there was a certain undervaluing of geography teaching in the school curriculum from various countries which became clear with the reforming of school curricula stimulated by the reformation in Spain. We would further emphasize that, since the EGAL that took place in Merida, Mexico in 2005, some of the problems presented by researchers in Geography Education passed through the undervaluing of geography teaching in the school curriculum, by changes to the curriculum and further, the research work presented, such as those from Chile, Argentina and Brazil did indeed have some troubling questions: “*How do students learn? How do they acquire knowledge?*” These questions challenge us to find answers based on fundamental theories of geography and education, which caused us to look again to the university – although always with an attitude of cooperation between university and basic public school.

The problems observed in the classroom lead us think about the manner of teaching and how the students learn. The questioning in common among researchers of various countries also addressed the difficulties in the reading and writing of the students and in respect of geography, how they do not perceive the space in which they live, understand spatial relationships or adequately locate themselves in the place in which they live. Understanding themselves spatially could stimulate students to read a map and recognize elements of the reality in which they live. Many of the experiences presented at the meetings and seminars show that in general, basic education students, often including the teachers, are not able for example to read a map – its keys –, although for geography this reading is important for the understanding of other geographical concepts. That is, the map has a language that needs to be understood, as in the text of any literary genre, therefore the students need to become geographically and at the same time scientifically literate.

Thus we consider that the importance of the REDLADGEO organization, as well as the International Colloquy was that of making possible exchanges and partnerships in research projects so that we can carry out comparative studies between the basic schools of various countries, comprehending how the young understand geographic content and become scientifically literate. Even though we know that there are many differences in each country in general there are many similarities, and for this reason it is necessary to wager on common investigations that can bring out the potential of geography teaching and at the same time renovate it.

We start from the idea that literacy, by means of concepts that are historically dear to school Geography, such as territory, nature, region, place, among others, can provide the student with meaningful learning in the sense of helping in understanding science and the world in which he or she lives, with the transfer of theories and methodologies that go beyond common sense. This possibility, which may be understood as life experience by the student of science, who can make use of new learning and that already learned from the starting point of different reference points, is called scientific literacy.

In some areas of knowledge, such as the teaching of Chemistry, Physics, Biology and Mathematics, scientific literacy is a field that has been worked on for some years. However, in the area to which the *Colloquy* is dedicated, the teaching of Geography, it is still a novelty, more serious study is necessary, a greater discussion.

Therefore, studies in the field of school Geography lack reflection about the materials and methods utilized, analyzing what the student learns and how it is learned, what the teacher incorporated and what was discarded in the process of the construction of concepts.

In this sense, we can understand that the *Colloquy* permitted advances and a deepening of discussions and proposals on the Teaching of School Geography and thereby for discussions about scientific literacy in this area of study, as for example, getting to know research carried out that may contribute to the production of knowledge related to theoretical-methodological concepts, the qualification of teachers, cartography for scholars and other outstanding themes of school Geography.

In proposing the presentation of the result of research and of the debate that took place at the Colloquy, our objective is to divulge themes that address investigations and innovations in the teaching of geography.

The proposal which we are presenting seeks to stimulate the debate about teaching and learning to the extent that this allows us to analyze and evaluate the methodological tendencies currently being debated in the academic environment, focused on schools.

The studies presented by researchers emphasize the diverse experiences and pedagogical concepts incorporated into the actions of public school teachers, discussing the interconnection between theory and practice, promoting the knowledge of teachers and of students in educational activities that make the class dynamic and provide significant learning.

Divulging existing debates in these areas expresses forms of learning that make it possible to orientate teachers in the new practices in the sense of improving the dynamic in the classroom, based on recent theoretical and innovative references about didactic and methodological practices carried out in Brazil, Colombia, Portugal and the United States. In this way, we are presenting what we intend to do starting from the organization of REDLADGEO:

- Establish an exchange of reading, concept and identification of school geography and teaches historically.
- Overcome the existing simplistic view of the teaching of geography, of casual explanations of facts and phenomena of nature without any analysis of reality nor of socio-territorial diversity.
- Bring to the formation of geography teachers thoughts on the spatial field in all its dimensions. Because of this, it is important to provide solid epistemological and pedagogical bases.
- Continue the analysis and enquiries on the geography space, which is reaffirmed as the object of geographic knowledge and the different structural concepts such as place, territory, region, among others, and which is explained as a product of social and work interaction, with a multiplicity of meanings and, from an interdisciplinary perspective, establishing dialogue with other areas of knowledge.

The results of these investigations, presented at the *Colloquy*, and the theoretical analysis that the authors made in the field of the teaching and learning of geography, contributed so

that the readers (teachers and future teachers) could acquire and have other references about the process of teaching and learning in a more significant manner. Still further, they make possible a widening of the debate about the diverse cultures, values and ideas that promote the permanent search for articulation of the theoretical and practical fields, perfecting fundamental concepts to provide new forms of working in basic education. All the themes addressed allow us to delve more deeply not only in respect of themes and concepts specific to Geography, but that we can amplify the sense and the actions that pertain to the school, such as the work with cognitive, socio-cultural and also affective questions. Much is expected of the school and of each of its members, but mainly of the teachers and students.

It is worth affirming that diverse concepts exist, from which starting point it is possible to consider the nature of work in geographic education, within the historical and epistemological context of geography. However, we constructed this research from a constructivist concept – considering the construction of knowledge, the socio-cultural context of the school and the methodologies that can innovate in teacher action. With this theoretical basis, we can think about how to advance some concepts that are dear to us in relation to public school teaching, that is to say, think of teaching with more quality and with teachers more conscientious about their role in society.

Those who have already had experience in the classroom and are familiar with teachers in training or even those in higher education, should know that teaching is a complex activity and sometimes difficult. Difficult because the question asked by teachers' remains: "*Why do the students not understand what for us is so evident?*" This lack of understanding brings us to Bachelard, written in 1938, *The Formation of the Scientific Spirit*, when he says that it is surprising that teachers (of sciences), more than others if that is possible, do not understand that someone (the student) does not understand. For us the question lingers: "What prevents students from learning not only science, but geography?" In the case of school geography, perhaps the greatest problem is in the stereotypical idea of its function and in the lack theoretical-methodological bases in the field of education and of geography.

One of important aspect of the work of Bachelard, which he highlights, and that the articles presented reveal in different forms, is the need for basic school teachers to know the students prior concepts, through the use of a problem. In a general sense, and here we have the similarities among the studies: in schools the cultural capital of the students is not taken into account, nor the prior knowledge that they bring as a consequence of the reality lived by them, principally in the teaching of geography.

We hope that the articles presented here can give visibility to what was discussed during the *Colloquy*, as well as contributing to an amplification of the theoretical-methodological debates of the principal concepts in the field of scholastic geographical epistemology and of learning (in the pedagogical field).

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