THEMATIC RESEARCH

INTERACTION OR DISCIPLINE

What is Happening at School?

MARÍA CLAUDIA SÚS

María Claudia Sús is a professor and researcher at Departamento de Psicopedagogía, Universidad Nacional del Comahue, Centro Regional Viedma. Esandy s/n, Viedma, Provincia Rio Negro, Argentina. E-MAIL: csus@impsat1.com.ar

Abstract:
This article, a product of the results of a research project carried out in Argentina from 1999 to 2003, addresses the topic of interaction in secondary school, in light of new legislation that attempts to replace the traditional model of school discipline with a model of democratic interaction. The study is based on the observation of individuals' daily actions in the classroom; its purpose is to describe and interpret forms of normative regulation and their relationship with the position of the school's actors, especially students and teachers. The analysis indicates that in spite of recent efforts, the old model based on discipline has not been totally replaced. It coexists with the model of interaction and may reemerge in the event of conflict or situations of violence.

Key words: educational policy, secondary education, educational democratization, teaching styles, Argentina.

The educational policies of recent years in Argentina have emphasized processes of democratization at school. Among other actions, they have promoted the implementation of a model of interaction (centered on the collective construction of norms that regulate the interaction of educational actors in the classroom and at school) to displace the disciplinary model of a culture of command/obedience. This model, however, has not been totally overcome. It coexists with the model of interaction, and is still a backdrop or context of the learning process. The problems for the institutionalization of scholastic interaction are basically the persistence of authoritarian attitudes, the inconsistency of many norms and the lack of clarity in the processes of sanctions, resulting in a collective sentiment of impunity that detracts from the process of democratic interaction.

There are indications that schools are opening their doors to democratization, but the task is not easy: there are advances and retrocession, contradictions and conflicts. However, as some pedagogues sustain, the naming of certain things configures realities. The words are already present: the journey to scholastic interaction and democratization has begun. It may be more similar to "chaos" than to harmonious interaction, but the key is to accept the conflict and annul it at school.

This study addresses the topic of interaction at secondary school, taking into account the new legislation that is attempting to implement a model of democratic interaction. The article is a product of a research project carried out from 1999 to 2003. The methodological theoretical focus (fundamentally of a comprehensive nature) permitted the interpretation of significant situations involving the forms of normative regulation and their relation to the actors' positioning. Observations were centered on the actors' daily actions, the importance the actors attribute to such actions and the way their meanings are constructed interactively with others in the complexity of classroom relations. The objective of observing daily actions was to describe and interpret what is played at school, along with the framework, meanings and constructions that occur in the gaps of the rules.

The classroom is the basic analytical unit, and the starting point for approaching other settings of a higher or lower level: institutional or governmental, according to the needs of deepening the analysis or placing it in context. Considering that the disciplinary normative order in the new paradigm must be

constituted as a text and context of the teaching/learning process, a framework was generated to explain the processes inherent to the disciplinary normative structure. Also explained were the dynamics in the sphere of relationships, as well as in didactic pedagogy.

The information units of primary data are especially constituted by the actors involved in class development: teachers and students. Others are occasionally included as key informants, such as preceptors and administrative personnel. The units of secondary information are the laws, norms, decrees, provisions and school regulations that form the supporting framework for democratic interaction at school.

Three basic techniques were used to obtain the data: analysis of the norm, class observation during the development of a thematic unit, and in-depth interviews. This focus cannot be classified as having a single perspective. It favors the logging and interpretation of processes that appear to be undocumented, and that are not foreign to the official legal discourse of education.

The topic of discipline—scholastic interaction at the secondary level—leads to the recognition of a pedagogical/didactic problem that is becoming more serious as it crosses the barriers of the institution and questions the disciplinary system as a whole. It exposes the learning generated in the institution and denounces the damage to the teacher/student ties that facilitate pedagogical encounters. Although the study's results refer to a specific historical and geographic context, it is possible to identify invariants in the problem. Such invariants are transcending and can reflect emerging educational situations in any school.

From Discipline to Democratic Interaction

The social conditions of what Gvirtz and Palamidessi (1998) called the culture of command/obedience, especially in the years following the democracy of 1983, enabled the provincial government of Río Negro and the national government of Argentina to permit the construction of a democratic system to replace the unquestionable blind obedience and arbitrary absolute power of authoritarianism.

Profound changes were introduced in the educational field by reforming authoritarian legislation and enacting new laws or decrees based on participation and consensus in the resolution of two basic situations: the democratization of the education system, and changes in perceptions and attitudes. The new democratic state calls for legitimization through learning and democratic practice. Individuals must be taught to free themselves from "traditional hierarchies" and the old values.

In that context, new meaning for discipline is suggested, within a framework of interacting relationships—relationships based legally on new proceedings and mechanisms that respond to situations of conflict in educational settings.

Thus the "unalienable right" to education enjoyed by all school-aged inhabitants and guaranteed by unrestricted access, is complemented by the right to remain in school. This right may not be withdrawn because of disciplinary reasons or absences. A nondiscriminatory school with equality must abolish all forms of expulsion, and implement the "right to a defense" through various mechanisms.

Councils of Interaction are created and regulated as organizations that permit regulating actors' interaction in the institutional setting. These Councils are based on the importance of associative aspects in the event of conflict, and the need to anticipate conflict through constant prevention.

The discursive construction of educational institutions now revolves around their training capacity (not repressive), along with the creation of an appropriate setting for interaction and learning about personal relationships. In such a setting, students are supported in their right to a defense, fundamental in democratic practice.

In spite of the attempts to implement strategies of democratic organization and the autonomous, responsible regulation of scholastic discipline, the functioning of the Councils of Interaction has

experienced partial success. The real situation has hindered the possibility of attaching new meaning to discipline as a collective construction to replace the old system. School norms continue to be an abstract exteriority that must be met. Discipline is still the backdrop or context of the teaching/learning process, but it is neither discussed nor observed: it is static and rigid, and loses the spirit of the new legislation.

The culture of participation that was put into force is based on a preventive paradigm that attempts strategically to address conflicts before their appearance, and to comprehend the logic of their functioning in order to react to them. Emphasis is not placed on adhering to the norm for the norm's sake, but on committing to comply with the norm because of the conviction of the value it represents. The norm is this case is the text and context of the teaching/learning process and a product of consensus. It represents the common denominator in heterogeneity. It is not everlasting, but readjusts and is open and flexible. It prohibits yet promises.

At School: Between Contradictions and Conflicts

The analyses reveal that in the institutional setting, traditional teacher-centered practices coexist with participative and committed practices that are in harmony with the new policies (although not the most frequent). This situation generates the impossibility of reaching a consensus on common strategies of learning and interaction, and reveals confusing conditions that have no definitive answers. It is more similar to chaos than to order. While democratizing schools is more a process of entering conflictive zones than of attaining the desired order, the lack of structure generates displeasure and regresses to supposedly eliminated practices.

Frustration and the wear and tear of unresolved issues cause teachers to return to old authoritarian systems or on the contrary, to reject classroom authority. In both cases, indiscipline emerges as a response to and denouncement of the lack of agreement between the norms and guidelines in effect and the teachers' operating system. In the first case, indiscipline is due to rebellion, and in the second, to a lack of limits.

The instability proposed by the new model, which is based on addressing conflict and constructing consensus, prevents its unanimous adoption. Atypical cases are darkened by the shadows of opposite models: blind obedience or permissiveness. Lamentably, the old structures reappear with more strength and adherence.

If the content of new learning is lost when urgent matters are handled, interaction does not replace the normalizing discipline that is once again the backdrop of classroom and institutional learning. In this manner, the desired process of democratization is weakened.

The security of routine opposes adventure, constant innovation and newness. Therefore, many educational actors return to parameters that provide them with the necessary security for operating, even if they are aware that such parameters are not the solution. Their foundation seems to be a return to old regulations, which may be somewhat dusted off while containing the same spirit: "The tearing down of walls is something that is happening... but their ruins do not guarantee their disappearance" (López, 2000:24). What the educational policy of the province was attempting to destroy, in order to pave the way for the decade of interaction, did not disappear. On the contrary, it reappeared, camouflaged by new architecture, but with the same force.

The transfer of discipline to the consensual construction of norms was a possible road to follow, but it either lost its way on the detours or stumbled on the obstacles. The democratization of school requires legal implementation. No democracy or education is possible without laws, but de facto rules must be replaced by the rule of law[1]–the pillar of participation.

Old systems of action in the disguise of innovation are unable to attach new meaning to the proposed changes. Many teachers have been able to incorporate the new policies; in several cases, they are handled from a discourse of innovation while lacking in meaning, and without the support of concrete practices. The language is incorporated but not translated into action.

The actors lose the enthusiastic adhesions inspired by the first stage of the normative framework. The mechanisms of resistance become more powerful, "assuming an opposition to institutional order that is neither deliberate nor systematic" (Frigerio y Poggi, 1997:128). They progress to notorious infraction, bordering on the dissolution of the official norm, to construct a parallel normative system. The exception is administration, which serves as an anchor to avoid expulsion from the system.

The Norm in Action: The Classroom as a Scenario

As sustained by Fernández (1992), school is a permanent stage of conflict. Conflicts that occur in the classroom are the result of informal negotiation processes located at the intermediate position between what the teacher or scholastic institution wants the students to do, and what the students are willing to do.

The classroom is where the final level of normative specification is crystallized. It is also the place of exchange between the teacher and group of students. It constitutes the playing field for the orientations of educational policy in its pedagogical/didactical as well as political/relational aspects. It can be described as a live scenario of interactions where different ideas, values and interests are exchanged, both explicitly and tacitly, and often contrasted. Such values have already received new meaning and have been conditioned at higher levels through the explicit and implicit sets of norms, but they come to life within or at the margin of norms.

Within the teacher's normative repertoire are norms that attempt to regulate learning. Other norms, of an institutional nature, tend to order the administration of time, space, movements and forms of organization. Norms related to interaction tend to provide guidelines for socio-emotional forces and interpersonal relationships among the group's members, and between students and the teacher (Gómez, 1993).

The teacher, on one hand, has the regulatory responsibility of maintaining order in the classroom, although many teachers reject this role. They sustain that their duty is to teach, not keep guard. They forget that part of the learning they direct is related to attitudinal content involving values—reasons that the norm represents.

The discipline that emerges from the set of norms is not simply the context that hinders or favors learning. According to the system in effect, discipline must be a textbook of learning that is channeled to generate spaces of discussion and participation. New norms must be enacted as required.

On the other hand, the teacher is a legal representative. He is legally invested with authority and as such, must contribute to complying with the institution's norms, not only in terms of interaction, but also according to the pedagogical basis of his profession and employment contract.

Repeated classroom observations have permitted the construction of three scenarios, in which actors' interpretations of the norm generate different librettos. Two do not represent the model of democratic interaction, and one presents characteristics that can gradually configure a structure of interaction, especially with regard to the desired system of negotiation.

Inflexibility or Rigidity of the Norm

This class structure responds to a style of command/obedience that requires the maintenance of formal order for pedagogical work: little movement, students seated in small groups, and a teacher who supervises students constantly; the teacher signals each aspect that is "uncalled for" with a glance or a

short verbal expression. In this setting, hierarchical supervision and normalizing sanctions are the instruments that permit the weak and permanent co-action that Foucault (1985) calls discipline.

Didactically, such classes have two basic moments: the teacher's responsibility for the explanation or bibliographical orientation, and the student's responsibility for completing activities, questionnaires and so on. While both moments are being developed, attempts to maintain order are not entirely successful: a point of rebellion is always present.

The teacher has his own disciplinary mechanisms to punish with subtlety. They remain concealed, but are used against those who dare to question the teacher. Such mechanisms establish that in spite of the idea of democratizing the system, the configuration of the classroom is not based on those principles. A democratic system cannot rest on pillars of hierarchy and authoritarianism.

Accreditation is used as a normalizing process, in explicit or implicit form. In both cases, tests are made more difficult or the arbitrary authority to raise or lower grades is employed. In such a game of power, the teacher is positioned as the authority capable of exercising the art of punishment, and his most powerful tools are the examination, the test and the grade. To paraphrase Foucault (1985), examinations combine the techniques of a supervising hierarchy and a normalizing sanction: examinations are a glance that normalizes, and a supervision that produces grades while classifying and punishing according to the results. Each student becomes a case, which situates him in a supervised zone and immobilizes him in a network; the case is an object for knowledge and power.

In this manner, the function of evaluation loses value, and the teacher uses implicit mechanisms in an attempt to manage discipline. Evaluation is employed as punishment. Learning is filtered as in the hidden curriculum, and refers to strategies for obtaining and using power.

This type of concealed disciplinary sanctions not only fails to solve the problem, but also inflicts increasing damage on the teacher/student relationship. It invades scholastic culture and amplifies the conflicts of two processes: actors' communication and evaluation. The teacher is trapped by a giant machine, as a routine actor who has the function of accrediting. In many situations, the teacher unconsciously uses evaluation as a refuge to safeguard his prestige and his place of power and authority—from which he labels and punishes.

The lack of knowledge of democratic strategies to handle situations places the teacher in a practice centered on his person. He needs accreditation as a legitimizing tool, and the student/teacher relationship is "debased" (Sanjurjo, 1994).

The pedagogical contract is imposed in writing. However, it is not an instance of construction, and becomes an explanation of guidelines—which refer in general to the form of written work: "complete, prolific, when the teacher specifies" (Pedagogical Contract, 3rd year, Civic Instruction, 2000). In particular, the most important support of learning would seem to be the subject file[2], or at least the "proof of crime". Teachers sustain that asking for a file obligates students to work and show continuity. Some students, however, state that "it does not represent the results of real work" (interview, students in 3rd year, 2000); some files are copied from others and do not reflect personal work, although students' grades may be a function of files.

Other guidelines refer to evaluation; however, rather than specifying quality norms[3] (to be used as the basis of grading), they indicate the ways evaluation will be carried out and communicated.

In terms of interaction, only one guideline states that "the work climate will be based on dialogue and mutual respect" (Pedagogical Contract, 3rd year). It includes a list of prohibited actions, such as "not leaving the classroom during class, not altering the class dictation, not arriving late, not eating in class" and so on (Pedagogical Contract, 1st year).

The structure of participation for preparing the pedagogical contract is vertical: the teacher prepares the contract and only the student is "subject" to it. Lost is the potential value of serving as an important

political/pedagogical tool in constructing consensus. If we understand that a contract, according to the dictionary, constitutes an oral or written agreement or pact between two or more persons, through which they assume rights and obligations (*Diccionario Enciclopédico Clasa*, 1998:358), we can observe that the pedagogical contract, because of the way it is prepared, does not consider all the subjects it involves. The agreement is formal. It becomes a set of duties that one person dictates and another person must comply with, and not vice versa. More than a contract, it is a set of internal classroom regulations that students "promise" to comply with to avoid punishment, although punishment is not explicit in the document that students receive at the initial meeting of each class.

The political logic that aims at consensus and participation as a norm for all decisions does not exist. Participation is notification and acceptance, and serves as proof that the student and family are aware of the norm and are thus responsible in the event of their noncompliance. The teacher feels that he is responsible for enforcing the guidelines, which are subsequently the students' responsibility. And the students, on the contrary, visualize the contract as an arrangement that need not be complied with to the letter, but only in an administrative sense; i.e., they must be informed and notify their parents. They are impregnated with an administrative and bureaucratic logic without much space for reflexive criticism and a new contract.

The norm is the axis for operations. An attempt is made to maintain the chain of normative specification from the levels that precede classroom regulation. The goal, not always achieved, is a relationship of continuity with institutional guidelines.

The evident rupture of the integrity of "context and text" in interaction, along with the split between written documents and real occurrences, paradoxically reinforce the maintaining of conditions that were in existence before the norms. Working from a perspective of value-oriented education or from a paradigm of democratic interaction has not been attained. The norm is exterior and calls for compliance, yet there is a lack of understanding of its true function in educating students and in teachers' roles as the authorities responsible for enforcing the law.

In these classes, negotiation is of a formal nature. The teacher monopolizes the classroom and attempts to impose his definition of the situation. This aspect is clearly visible in the second group, where formal elements have great weight, and the strategies of the pedagogical contract are secondary: the teacher gives orders, and students comply with them. The situation becomes unilateral. The norms are pronounced by the teacher in order for the student to comply. The process is called negotiation because agreement is requested, yet no place is given to divergence or suggestions. The student signs in agreement and obeys the teacher by playing the teacher's game.

The result of the consensus, adhered to with little involvement, is generally pseudo agreement. In other words, the attainment is "agreement and partial gratification, at times with benefits for some and losses for others, and at other times the inverse" (Gómez, 1993:57). Although the situation is not ideal, it is one of the healthiest of the observed situations in terms of the ability to compensate for episodes. It is the place of greatest clarity in the system of rewards and punishments: explicit internal rules have implicit meanings of "give and take" or "today you do what I say, and tomorrow we'll dedicate part of the time to what you like" (teacher interview, 1st, 3rd and 5th years). It is common to observe this type of "trades" since they allow the teacher to decrease group tensions and keep the group working without abandoning the prescription of his role. The teacher dictates the norms and tries to maintain the continuity of established institutional aspects. The norms of quality and results reign. Discipline is considered the necessary context for learning, but not part of learning. It takes the form of assumptions or prohibited behaviors.

The students play with tacitly censual adherence. They know that if they do not adapt to the teacher's norm, the result will be failure. They clearly explore the limits to determine how far and what

to negotiate with the teacher. They test their strength, winning one day and losing the next. The rules are understood and accepted: "After all is said and done, she's not so bad. She makes you work hard, without moving, like the army. But if you do it well, then you decide how the next time" (interview with 5th-year student). "If we focus on the first unit and finish quickly, then we continue on to construction, the part we like. But first we have to suffer with the first part that she wants" (interview with 3rd-year student).

This type of negotiation has greater continuity. Readjustments are permanent and the actors resort to form, although for different reasons. Low involvement and commitment are commonly seen in the negotiated work. Various mechanisms of reluctance are observed in completing the work, yet students comply in a greater of lesser degree—at least in terms of formal aspects and for the teacher.

Inconsistency of Norms

The configuration of these classes does not correspond to didactic parameters. Homework is not coordinated, the purpose is lost and students do not perceive the objectives. Situations are observed in which prohibited behaviors are increasingly tolerated, even if they imply the impossibility of holding class. In general, classroom situations develop at times of very weak regulation. A wide variety of actions may occur that are not always in agreement with a classroom system. Each student does as he wishes—playing cards, chatting, or wandering around the classroom. The location is the classroom; there are students and a teacher, but it is not clear if there is anyone who is teaching (at least not explicitly), or anyone who is learning (at least not intentionally).

The teacher pretends to be teaching, and the student pretends to learn. Since the teacher has rejected the role of educator and has lost his authority, he acts as if he were one of the students' peers. In fact, if one were to read a classroom transcription that did not differentiate between the teenager and the adult, it would be almost impossible to determine who was who. The teenager and the adult are confused, the pedagogical relationship is perverted, and with it, the institutional mandate.

The lack of respect is not absent, but in many cases, it can be considered as a weakness on both sides. The exception would be certain cases in which the student is identified as behaving incorrectly with his teacher or peers. Blows, shoves and cursing are common and are tolerated, with rare exceptions, in the classroom and on the school grounds. They may be pointed out, but in a joking form: "What a mouth!" "It sounds like we're at a soccer match!" "You're so sweet! I love seeing how you treat each other!" (1st-year class, Language). Between irony and humor is the possibility of indicating incorrect behavior, but the teacher is not considered the authority. What is a joke? By definition, a statement that causes laughter—as is mockery or jest; but if we refer to mockery, we imply ridicule and a physical aspect. With a joke, the teacher abstains from indicating that the behavior is not correct (Fimple and Vercellino, 2001:2). Paraphrasing De Lajonquiére, the teacher loses the opportunity to appear as an authority of scholastic tradition, and denies his students the possibility of learning the adult difference of "correct/incorrect" and to inquire about the desire behind the action (De Lajonquiére, 1999:93).

In these classes, norms—the lowest level of specification of educational policy—are almost inexistent. They are viewed as separate from the school's normative framework. Classes take place in a totally informal climate, bordering on a lack of respect on both sides and without extensive development of content. The teacher and students infringe on institutional and classroom norms, which change continually; the universality of norms is lost in the particularities. The teacher interprets norms according to the needs of the moment. The objective seems to be to pass time, work on some of the content, and avoid any unmanageable conflict.

The norms of production refer only to the number of projects or questions to answer in order to pass, according to the time and the person. Norms of quality are highly ambiguous; therefore, grades do not correspond to production and vary from person to person (equal work graded in a different way). The norms of interaction do not adjust to the needs of a place of teaching and learning; interchange occurs in a climate of permanent jest and clever talk. There is a constant tug of war between teachers and students, rather than encounters aimed at sharing increasingly more important pieces of knowledge.

The infractions committed by both members of the pedagogical pair pervert the meaning of their relationship. The act of refusing to educate is the basic transgression revealed in these cases, yet it is not denounced by students or noticed by the institution, although it may be suspected. Norms have been instituted that block norms that are specifically political, pedagogical and didactic; the situation is resolved in a "let's pretend" that represents a pact between the two actors. The norm is acting as if, although nothing is done.

What is terrible, beyond the lost meaning of the pedagogical encounter, is the result of a student's failure to comply with this implicit agreement and adapt to the game in which the norms are diluted and improvisation rules. As the cause of a conflict that threatens to reveal the transgression of the norms of professionalism, such a student becomes an individual cause or a rioter who is submitted to a type of revenge by the person who has the formal power to punish.

In this framework, we can consider negotiation by truce because, in reality, negotiating before the declaration of war is implicit; conflict or friction is prevented by a previous truce. But what would seem to be a wager on "peace" is actually quite precarious. Any conflict can make the agreement break apart, converting each student into a battle trophy.

The result of this consensus, which is generally tacit and not highly supported by joint work, is disagreement; i.e., part of the "contradiction between the situation's definitions and the losses or frustrations for both parties" (Gómez, 1993:57). A high level of suffering is clear in these cases for all actors. Tensions emerge in permanent complaints from both parties and mediocre results.

The teacher attempts to agree on norms with the group, but the true agreement is based on transgressing the official norm behind a façade of acceptance and compliance. The problem is that in the face of a conflictive situation, the teacher returns to marked authoritarianism and acts in a dogmatic and personalized form. It works as long as no conflict becomes apparent, and alternates with periods of formal negotiation that serve as a front for chaos and attempts to justify the unjustifiable.

Disciplinary norms are agreed upon but not fulfilled. Norms of results and quality are prepared by the teachers and put up for consideration, but in practice, action is what the student decides. Students interact in an informal climate; interchanges are allowed between classmates, and movements between subgroups. There is a broad margin of trust with regard to the teacher, who may be addressed directly and included in jokes. But the limits tend to be so diffuse that a lack of mutual respect often occurs. In that case, the limit that opens the door to authoritarianism is not known.

Projects are generally group work, with some individual examples. They do not have much pedagogical orientation and are carried out as repeatable structures, practical projects of analyzing texts, answering questions, formulating conclusions, and so on. The level of response to the pedagogical norm is differential and is tolerated by the teacher. Such a situation is seen as unfair because all pass beyond complying with the norms. If no conflict is present, all pass.

The mechanisms of evaluation are made more flexible. Practical work is required instead of written tests, and the norms of production and quality vary according to the student. The goals are minimum production and the prevention of conflict, under the threat of punishment, but they are rarely attained. They are observed only occasionally in very serious situations, although they may weaken until a new

agreement is reached, or disappear with the suspension and expulsion of a student who does not play the game.

Weakness of the Norm

Such classes are characterized by little structure, the search for an informal climate, and sustained work oriented to group or individual projects. Didactically, they have no clear configuration. They are centered on a task that has continuity over time because of a topic on which a teaching guide has been based.

The teachers very rarely intervene to regulate interaction or to determine the quality of work. A wide margin of noise and mobility is permitted in the classroom, provided that planned activities are completed. Tolerated behaviors are varied as long as a general working attitude is maintained. When the teacher notices that students have stopped working (because it is overly obvious), he tries to have them work by threatening an examination or ordering, "Get to work!" or "Silence!" (observation log, History, 4th year).

There is practically no record of explicit interventions in relation to interaction; such learning is constructed through the hidden curriculum. The latent norm that regulates interaction is the grading or occurrence of an examination, made explicit by threatening a test or testing the subject as a means of redirecting the situation. A threat, according to the dictionary (*Diccionario Enciclopédico Clasa*, 1998), is no more than expressing with words or gestures the intent to harm or damage another: "If you don't stop, I'll give you a test" (observation log, 3rd year). A threat is also an indication that something especially unpleasant is going to happen immediately: "Get to work or take out a piece of paper and start writing" (observation log, 1st year, Language). If we consider the first meaning, the teacher unconsciously announces the damage because he knows he has the tools to cause low grades, which hurt the student; he is complemented by the second meaning, in that he operates by forecasting the coming danger.

In some cases, threats lead to punishment. And in others, the threat operates as a moderator and remains strictly that: a threat. It serves as a means for preventing or halting an act that the teacher prohibits or does not tolerate. At no time does it appeal to the reasons behind norms or apply the punishment implied by noncompliance. There are no sanctions, only threats.

This style of relating to the norm is less conflictive and more productive when the group has attained a high level of cohesion, and regulates itself as a function of the task and the proposed norms of quality and production. It is a more flexible model in terms of the norms of interaction and didactic/pedagogical norms, and attempts self-regulation rather than outside imposition. Thus the model would seem to approach democratization although some aspects must still be refined and certain mechanisms made explicit for constructing and sustaining norms.

Could this model be the beginning or the transition to more democratic mechanisms? Could a more flexible framework be the condition that enables consensus on new norms? How can consensus be translated into acts and not perish in the letter of the pedagogical contract? In these cases, a consensus is negotiated and reached with a high level of positive involvement. Even with errors, class dynamics refer to a contract that results in harmony; i.e., "the congruity of the definitions of the situation and the possibility to obtain gratifications for both parties" (Gómez, 1993:57). This favors a high level of positive involvement and real participation of teachers and students. Of influence in the situation are norms from all spheres (pedagogical, interaction and institutional), although equilibrium among norms is not always reached.

The harmony achieved in negotiation is stronger when special projects are developed (such as science fairs or reading campaigns). The proposals of such projects include various alternatives and give the student control of possibilities for the way information is organized, presented and evaluated. In

general, the teacher explains the scope of the topic and the students prepare the learning project that the teacher will supervise and orient. The process implies a rupture with the daily class structure.

Thinking about the relation between the attainment of a culture of interaction and the normative proposal of pedagogy would be worthwhile. The experiences logged in the research explain that such projects allow teachers to move gradually towards the orientation of work, while students accept greater responsibility and topics are organized around axes or problems in which students play an important role. A structure designed by the teacher has been replaced by the acceptance of one's own design and the commitment to take it forward.

In Closing

The greatest problems in constructing a culture based on democratic interaction—centered on personal and group responsibility—would seem to have their origin in aspects such as:

The impossibility of changing systems of action: "We talk about interaction but we act like security guards."

Replacing discipline with the paradigm of interaction, while maintaining the same underlying ideology, is to operate in partial settings of reality. The results constitute acceptance and the use of new theoretical jargon more than the theoretical framework of a different reality. The system of discipline is attacked for the sake of interaction; yet emphasizing relations independent from the content and forms of teaching reveals teaching that has little in common with the curriculum and system of evaluation. This phenomenon strengthens the presence of an outside authority that organizes and orders to justify its position, while surreptitiously disguised as a paradigm of democratization and interaction. All vocabulary considered obsolete or even dangerous because of its relationship with the disciplinary system or authoritarian practices is eliminated. New terminology is incorporated without the necessary conceptual appropriation, as if it were a style used to acquire the privileges of progressiveness. Interaction is referred to but disciplinary action is taken; no new meaning is attached to disciplinary practice in the light of the incorporated concepts. The traits of the didactic setting are hidden to convert discipline, in the best of cases, into a problem of relationships that can be solved by appealing to good will.

Lack of institutional consensus: "If we adults do not agree."

Serious problems are apparent in various institutions for reaching a consensus, as well as a basic agreement to be respected in the event of conflicts. This situation represents a real lack of participation, the impossibility of holding a discussion without its becoming personal, and the impossibility of working on converging proposals from divergent settings.

> Although we utilize certain criteria with the same guidelines, differences are seen. I think that we are not able [...], what is hard for all of us is holding a discussion without resentment and taking a joint position [...]. As long as we are unable to grow in this aspect we are not going to function as a whole. Here a discussion is a battle. And no, a discussion is a discussion, and it is born and it dies there. We obviously are not going to be eternally in agreement, in love with each other. It might happen, but I don't know where. But it would be interesting if after so many years together, we could learn to function in another way. We must learn how [...] (interview with preceptor, urban school without social risk).

Differences that are not overcome in a group not only hinder discussion and the possibility of upholding agreements, but also reveal problems of interaction among teachers, who are paradoxically responsible for developing the new proposal.

> If respect is not the starting point, if we do not learn to discuss and respect the decision of the majority, we are not going to progress. If we are not sincere with each other, if we do not learn to hold discussions without insulting each other, and have an attitude and flexibility for analysis, without being apathetic, if everything is based on cronyism, nothing is going to work (interview with preceptor, marginal urban school with social risk, 2000).

In the midst of dilemma, paradox, intents at new constructions, anger, resignations and a climate far from democratic interaction, there is no attainment of participative processes and real commitments among the institution's adult members.

Endurance of authoritarian practices: "We have guidelines for interaction, but I'm the boss here."

In most schools, the implicit norm is the continuity of a hierarchical, rigid regime, in which the last word is that of the director, who must be give explanations to the supervisor. The chain of command is modified by modifications in personal treatment and a greater amount of informality, but the imperative nature remains in the background, especially with regard to administrative norms.

> [...] defining school as the site of situations and processes loaded with "dramatic significance"—as in the condensation of tensions and conflicts—given the possible desynchronization or distance between the political discourse emanating from the state [...] and the practices and representations of the social subjects to whom such discourse is directed. Desynchronization that would occur in the endurance of "authoritarian" practices, rules, symbols (Achilli, 1993:18).

Contrary to the prescribed norm of democratization, consensus, participation and the joint construction of an educational project, the norms that are transmitted from mouth to mouth and incorporated in practices through uses and customs promote the command/obedience model:

> The meetings here would begin when the director came in. Even the way we were seated—one of the things I disliked the most—was like a classroom, with the director in the teacher's place, the assistant director to one side, as if he were the assistant, and the rest of the teachers sitting at the desks. After dealing with the matter at hand, the space was somewhat less structured... yet neither was it a shared thing; nothing was done that was not ordered. There was nothing forced; some people would say "let's deal with such-and-such a thing", but it was like adding more things because the sooner we were finished, the quicker we could leave. Immediately after the issue indicated by the director was solved, we took it easy (interview with assistant director, urban school without social risk).

The implicit group norm would seem to be rapid adherence to the director's proposals and fulfillment of "duties", in order for everything to be complete in time and space. What the director wants to see or hear is outlined, and everyone goes home with the idea of having fulfilled his mission. Without questioning evaluation or accusing teachers, this fact explains the multi-determination of the institutional dynamic and the norms constructed in and for the institution. No sector is guiltier than the other: at most, reference can be made to shared responsibilities.

Accreditation as a sanction or punishment: "You'll have to go to summer school!"

The use of strategies of disciplinary sanctions (which are mixed and confused with strategies of evaluation/accreditation and disciplinary systems) does not imply the configuration of mechanisms of interaction centered on preventive and corrective processes rather than punitive processes.

According to the norms of evaluation, accreditation and grading, the failure to appropriate attitudinal contents remains expressly outside of accreditation. They should be evaluated, rather than graded/accredited, to establish corrective strategies. Nonetheless, students who show a problem in interaction are discredited. For this reason, mechanisms are used that violate the system. On the other hand, they are perverse[4] because they resort to traps that legitimate failing students for bad behavior, while disguised by conceptual failure, "of provoking what later will be inevitable" (Etkin, 1997:5).

> What I didn't mention is that what you usually do with kids who don't do what they are repeatedly asked to do is to use a more difficult type of evaluation. On the last days, when the kids were most difficult, I used that method [...] I designed a test with four topics and the hardest one was for those kids [...] With topics they had already studied, but with the most difficult instructions, with the most complex words [...] It's not generally done, but when there are impossible kids, it is done more as a function of setting limits (interview with teacher, 1st and 3rd years).

It is obvious that in an attempt to handle discipline, grades are often used as punishment. This practice can reach the extreme of causing students to fail and quit school. On the other hand, by not using democratic strategies in handling situations, the teacher is positioned in a practice centered on his person, and will need accreditation as a legitimizing tool—although the function of norms is hidden and the content of norms twisted, with the resulting corruption of the meaning of adolescent education.

Implemented impunity: "Anyway, nothing happens."

In the presence of actors' constant infraction of the norm, the impunity and naturalization of these situations favor noncompliance with norms (whether consensual or not), along with an increased number of tolerated behaviors. Denouncement loses meaning in the face of the impunity enjoyed by the violator. Many serious acts remain hidden or unpunished, even when the hierarchical lines of responsibility are followed: preceptor-director or teacher-preceptor-director. Some sanctions are not carried out because actors withdraw their complaint after the fact or do not make the complaint known.

> Let's say that suspensions are not very common. The warning is a note to the parents that explains why the note is sent and suspensions [...] They say that after three warnings a suspension follows [...] That was never carried out. It depends on the severity of the problem. In the case of the firecrackers, the kids were suspended, but there were other problems besides, with previous warnings. They use a lot of warnings, but nothing beyond that. Disrespect, a warning [...] when you're on the borderline, if you're getting along pretty well with the teachers or with the preceptors, they forgive you (interview, 3rd-year student).

The difference between what is written and what is carried out in diverse situations of conflict, or in daily situations at school, shows that the ruling conception is not interaction, but discipline—discipline as a context of learning, as a backdrop that is imposed, and as a phenomenon that leaves little space for the construction of democratic mechanisms.

Notes

[1] Norms can be considered as de facto or as the rule of law, according to the underlying structure of participation. The rule of law is based on a structure of participation and acceptance that permits shared legitimization; de facto rules, on the contrary, reflect a symmetry of power between those who announce the rules and those who comply with them (Gómez, 1993).

[2] The term, "file", refers to the set of work completed by the student during all the class sessions, plus all the activities the teacher assigns as homework. Teachers grade files as student production, and view them as compliance with the tasks of learning. Such a representation is not shared by students, who often do not view files as either production or learning, since they are copied from other files or compiled from seemingly meaningless information.

[3] Stenhause (1997), from a culturalist positioning, establishes four types of norms: a) discipline—norms that attempt to maintain certain types of behaviors in the class with respect to location, attention, silence, and interactions in general; b) results—the type and amount of production in the class, which becomes a social norm when the group tries to interpret the demands of their situation; c) content—the attitude towards the content of the curriculum, and a judging of the interest and relevance of the material taught; and d) quality—considered most important by Stenhause, consists of student evaluations of the value and clearness of their work. These norms contribute to the support of self-criticism.

[4] According to the meaning that Etkin gives the term: "Perversity is not shown as an error, accident or contingency, but as a recurring trait in certain organizations [...]. We study the perverse as an immoral choice in the framework of the normative rules of social behavior" (1997:4-5).

Bibliography

Achilli, E. L. (1993). *Profe, ¿no quiere que cambiemos la escuela?,* Rosario, Argentina: Universidad Nacional de Rosario.

De Lajonquiere, L. (1999). *Infancia e ilusión (psico) pedagógica*, Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión.

Diccionario Enciclopédico Clasa. (1998). Colombia: Editorial Norma.

Etkin, J. (1997). *La doble moral de las organizaciones. Los sistemas perversos y la corrupción institucionalizada*, España: McGraw-Hill/Interamericana.

Fernández Enguita, M. (1992). *Poder y participación en el sistema educativo: Sobre las contradicciones de la organización escolar en un contexto democrático*, Barcelona: Paidós Educador.

Fimple y Vercellino (2001). *Proyecto de extensión: ser alumno hoy* (documento de trabajo), UNC (mimeo).

Foucault, M. (1985). *Vigilar y castigar,* México: Siglo XXI.

Frigerio, G. y Poggi. M. (1997). *El análisis de la institución educativa. Hilos para tejer proyecto*, Buenos Aires: Santillana.

Gómez, M. (1993). *Sociología del disciplinamiento escolar*, Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI.

Gvirtz y Palamidessi (1998). *El abc de la tarea docente: currículum y enseñanza",* Buenos Aires: Aique.

López, P. (2000). "Nuestra época, sus instituciones: no hacer un mundo de ellas", en Vega, D. *et al. Travesías institucionales: Escritos de una subjetividad implicada en el campo social*, Buenos Aires: Lugar Editorial.

Sanjurjo, L. (1994). *Aprendizaje significativo y enseñanza en los niveles medio y superior,* Buenos Aires: Homo Sapiens.

Stenhause, L. (1997). *Cultura y educación,* Sevilla: Publicaciones CEP.

Article received: February 22, 2005
Accepted: May 25, 2005