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## Interculturality as a Core Aspect of Education for Democracy: A Dialogue with Sylvia Schmelkes

### Abstract

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In this dialogue, the editor of *Revista Interamericana de Educación para la Democracia*, Bradley Levinson, interviews the distinguished educator and educational researcher, Professor Sylvia Schmelkes, member of this Journal's Editorial Board, who is the Director of the Department of Education at Universidad Iberoamericana de México<sup>‡</sup>. Sylvia Schmelkes has an extensive and renowned career as an educational researcher, and has specialized in education in values, popular and nonformal education, and aspects dealing with the quality of elementary education. Her most prominent books and papers include *La Calidad de la Educación Primaria en México*, *Hacia Una Mejor Calidad de Nuestras Escuelas*, *La Formación en Valores en la Educación Básica*. For many years, Professor Schmelkes worked as incumbent researcher at the Centro de Estudios Educativos, and later at the Departamento de Investigaciones Educativas (CINVESTAV-IPN), in Mexico. In 2001, she joined the Ministry of Public Education as Director of the Coordination Office for Intercultural and Bilingual Education, a position that she held until 2007.

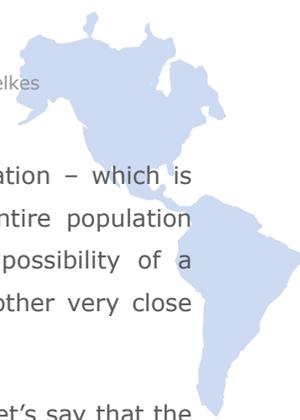
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**BL:** Let's start with quite a general topic: the relationship between education and democracy. According to your experience and point of view, what are the key issues in the relationship between education and democracy in the Americas? In other words, what are the most urgent demands and challenges for attaining a good education for democracy?

**SS:** I think the relationship is practically evident, isn't it? Because nobody is born knowing how to participate, or how to negotiate, or how to listen to others; those things then have to be learned, somehow. And even though you may learn all that from life, from whichever experiences you may have in groups or in organizations – and these may provide for the best way to learn it – there is nothing to ensure that this process will be generalized, that is, that individuals will have the opportunity to participate in this type of groups and to learn by participating. Then it is the school that has to take on this responsibility, it is evident, and it has to do so in an intentional manner, on a gradual, evolutionary basis, not only as a *transmissive* act but

also as an experiential act. This imposes on the school the need to become a common organizational space where participation can be enacted, where negotiation can take place, where the others have to be listened to, minorities have to be listened to, where a certain discipline needs to be exercised, such as asking for permission to speak, etc.

That's it, let's say, as a first approximation. However, it is also quite true that the *polis* teaches, of course the *polis* teaches – what happens in the political life of your neighborhood, of your community, of your town, of your country – all that is continuously teaching you. However, it can also teach you for **the worse**, can't it? Because what the political life of your community or country teaches you is what actually **does happen**, and not necessarily what should happen from the point of view of the democratic ideal. Thus, many people in that situation failed to be socialized in democracy, or it was a democracy that simulates, that is corrupt, a democracy where you can buy votes, and all of this can also be learned.



The school, then, would presumably have the possibility of training in the democratic ideal, and not only as a theoretical issue, but as something that is experienced, something that enables you to gradually develop your democratic abilities as such: the ability to discern, to listen, to make decisions, to negotiate, etc. That is where we find a first and most important relationship, one that at least in Mexico was not very clear for a long time: that is, that if the school was not training in democracy, then who was? Because the issue of training in democracy is an issue that demands what all education demands: a purpose, a gradual approach, and an evaluation – in other words, being able to account for the progress you make. This necessarily leads you to the need to relate the issue to a certain content, not necessarily through a single entry point, which might be a school subject; it is better still if done across subjects and if it is assumed by the entire school. All this is required, but we are still far from having it effectively operating in our schools.

Well, that's one point. The other is that, the more democracy relies on individuals who are either well-informed or capable of becoming informed, well, the better it works, in theory at least. One would assume that since democracy is based on active participation, the more knowledgeable people are – the more information they have, not only about each person's lot but about the lot of their community, their town, or their country – the greater that participation will be. To that extent democracy will be deeper. In this regard, there is a very close relationship between education and democracy, because education informs you and presumably educates you so that you can get the information required when it is required. Therefore, education provides for a better-informed democracy.

The third point is the conviction that if democracy is not for everyone, it is not democracy; that is to say, either everyone in a country actively participates in a democratic fashion or there is no democratic life. Democracy is neither for governing elite, nor for a decision making group: it is for everyone. And from

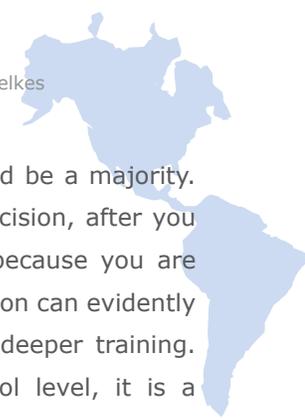
this point of view, elementary education – which is allegedly compulsory and for the entire population – creates the foundations for the possibility of a democracy for everyone. That is another very close relationship...

If we delve deeper into the subject, let's say that the more education you have, the wider your horizons are. That means that you are able to analyze other realities, to understand or try to understand other ways of looking at the same situation, even other cultures. This also leads to a strengthening of democracy, because it has to do with tolerance.

Finally, there is the question of critical conscience, which means that the more education you get the more ability to be critical you have. Democracy demands critical thinking, because democracy obviously does not end up with the ballot, but what it demands is to be able to ensure that the consequence of the ballot is implemented. Such a process requires criticality, and at that point education is crucial.

**BL:** Right. I have a doubt: I would like you to comment on the relationship between authority and critical conscience. What is the challenge of defining *how far* critical questioning should go, that is, when and how should youths criticize in an institution such as the school, where there is a supposedly legitimate, adult, public authority? This is a tension that has been much commented upon: between authority, on the one hand, and on the other, freedom, the critical voice, and active participation. It is a pending issue, let us say: authority and democracy.

**SS:** I believe this is an evident day-to-day tension, not just a theoretical one. I believe the most authentic, most deeply felt tension is that with absent authority, rather than with face-to-face authority. Well, in **theory**, because quite dreadful tensions can also arise with face-to-face authority, precisely when this authority is too authoritarian. But with absent authority, with the normative framework of the educational system and all it entails, which imposes limits to the school itself, it



comes from outside – in other words, it is an imposed normative framework, it's something you can't fight with, you can't argue with – it is simply there.

**BL:** And it needs to go through a number of mediations that are alien to the students...

**SS:** Alien to the students, and totally alien even to the teachers themselves. They cannot question certain things, for example, they cannot question why lessons should last 50 minutes<sup>2</sup>, or why school hours should start at 7 in the morning, or why the school calendar needs to be so rigid, why students cannot choose their school subjects. That's where a very strong tension arises, because you may want to encourage this critical capacity from the school, but when you clash with normativity you need to put a limit to it. You cannot always appear as a school authority, or as someone who is always in favor of criticizing the system to which you belong. Therefore, this is a very complex situation.

Now, with face-to-face authority, for example, with the school principal or the teacher in a position of authority, in theory the tension can be somehow solved. Teachers' criticality with regards to their principal, or students' criticality with regards to their teacher or principal, is something that can be dealt with through dialogue, through discussion. It should become a democratic decision, assumed by everyone and susceptible to revision in the future. But it's an example of an opportunity to educate in democracy, I believe.

**BL:** An authority should give the reasons for a given school regulation. But, what if the student rejects those reasons?

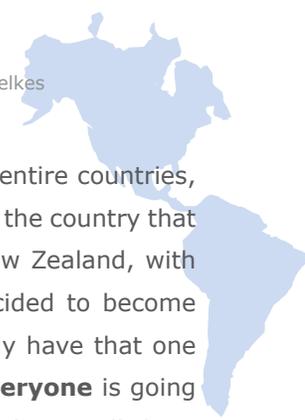
**SS:** That's why I tell you that it's in theory, because the idea is that regulations are made by everyone. The point rather lies in the democratic exercise of making our own regulations and understanding the reason behind them, the values underlying the regulations you make, and of subjecting yourself to them because even though perhaps you were not in agreement with

them, you do agree that there should be a majority. Then you subject yourself to that decision, after you have demanded to be listened to, because you are the minority. Thus, that existing tension can evidently become an opportunity for a much deeper training. That's why I tell you: at the school level, it is a beneficial and resolvable tension.

**BL:** Right. Shall we move on to consider the role of intercultural education as part of a project involving education for democracy? In the United States and in other countries, the concept of multiculturalism has been used a great deal. What is the difference between multiculturalism and interculturality? How do you conceive intercultural education as an integral aspect of education for democracy?

**SS:** Let's begin with the second question. What is the difference between multicultural education, or multiculturalism, and interculturality? I do believe that multiculturalism consists in acknowledging diversity, and that this acknowledgement is extremely important. Obviously, it also lies at the very basis of democracy, because this plurality is implicit in democracy. Therefore, when plurality in a given country or region, whatever it is that should be democratized – this is important – when diversity is cultural, multiculturalism is the foundation of democracy, it is the foundation of that pluralism. A democracy that fails to reflect that cultural pluralism is a fictitious democracy in the region where there is multiculturalism. This is the situation that holds in all Latin American countries: in fact, democracy is not multicultural at all; there is no acknowledgment of the existing diversity. It is naturally an acknowledgement that presupposes tolerance; it presupposes acknowledging the other's rights, democratic rights, the right to voice an opinion, the right to vote, etc.

For me, then, multiculturalism is **very** clearly at the foundation of democracy. The concept itself makes reference to this plurality, without which democracy cannot be understood, because democracy arises precisely so that agreements may be reached by



different and varied individuals, who think differently and support different solutions. I believe that's a very evident relationship.

Now, the problem with multiculturalism is that it stops exactly there, at the point where differences are acknowledged. It doesn't go beyond that. You can acknowledge, and even tolerate that the other who is different has a right to voice an opinion and vote. But you can maintain relationships that may be characterized by discrimination, segregation and marginalization – all of which we are familiar with. Nevertheless, the multicultural reality is still there. And multiculturalism continues to be acknowledged as such. There is no doubt that in the US there are multiple cultures present, or that in Mexico there are 62 indigenous peoples, but that does not mean we are going to do away with racism, with discrimination. It does not mean that in the least.

That is why, in my opinion, it is the concept of interculturality that goes a step further in providing for deepening democracy and education for democracy. Because it **does** go into the relationships, you see, between members of the different cultures. And from my point of view, it also characterizes those relationships. Consequently, there cannot be interculturality as long as asymmetries endure due to cultural differences, because in that case it is not interculturality. Interculturality presupposes a relationship characterized by mutual respect and esteem, a relationship that is mutually enriching, horizontal, based on positions of equality. That is what characterizes interculturality.

The foregoing is a reality which is not present in any of the countries where multiculturalism exists. In other words, there is multiculturalism, but there is no interculturality. Therefore, the passage from "multi" to "inter" has to be dealt with through education for democracy.

**BL:** Are you conversant with any models, or perhaps experiences, in other countries that may be useful?

**SS:** I think that generally, regarding entire countries, it is hardly possible, is it not? Perhaps the country that comes closest to it is the case of New Zealand, with the Maori. This country one day decided to become "bi-cultural" – "**bi**," because they only have that one group. One day they decided that **everyone** is going to learn Maori, and that [Maori] culture will form part of the national culture, and that everyone will have to learn to greet in the Maori style. However, it is still quite an artificial measure and the Maori are still obviously in a position of great disadvantage, educational inequality, economic inequality – that is, these asymmetries continue to be present. But this is perhaps the case that comes closest to it; it is a process that goes in that direction, so to speak, because there is a political will that claims: the distinctive feature of this nation is this pluriculturalism.

The other case is Canada, although I am not so happy to mention it because it's awful as relates its indigenous population. But Canada is one of the "multi" countries that have been "inter". They have acknowledged that the country would not have been possible without the migrations of all kinds of peoples, from all over the world. And unlike the United States – that went through the well-known "*melting pot*," which is not working any longer either – Canada did not opt for a *melting pot* model from the start. It opted for acknowledging this diversity and for assuming it as their wealth by "celebrating diversity," as they say. Subsequently, [in Canada] they have developed marvelous teaching methodologies. As I said, I don't like to mention this case because, curiously, the Canadian experience has been awful with its indigenous population. It's as if they said, 'This is all very well for migrants, for those who are building the nation,' from the point of view of the colonial times and colonization, but not with regards to the indigenous population.

Then, there are also small-scale experiences, in Madrid, for example, that have opted for intercultural education for a long time. A small school in the Madrid community may give you a picture of a very



interesting experience of a leap from “multi” to “inter,” because they have already had ten years of intercultural education and have chosen to “welcome” diversity. That has implied not only that those who are different feel good, but also that they are respected and esteemed by everyone. In other words, that’s a kind of intercultural education for everyone because everyone has to be concerned about that diversity; in addition, they can all take **advantage** of diversity. So, there are schools that have understood the concept very well and they are wonderful. But generally speaking, these are **extremely** partial experiences; they are underway, in process. I believe there is no country that has succeeded in implementing this experience.

In a conversation with the former ambassador of Mexico in South Africa, he was telling me about how difficult it has been, after the fall of apartheid, to construct the possibilities for coexistence in South Africa. There are 13 different groups, but the asymmetries are **dreadful**. Then, what is happening now is that ethnic resentment is flourishing, resentment is surging. After the fall of the apartheid, resentment is springing forth. Then we can see the difficulty of constructing something, even though the conditions are different and the political will is different, and the idea is to have South Africa become a truly intercultural country, but that has been extremely difficult.

In the end, these experiences are either very partial, or limited, let’s say, or contradictory – such as the Canadian case – or underway, such as the case of New Zealand, and in the latter who knows if it is a really serious process or if it is merely folklore (laughter)...

**BL:** Or due to a political administration, a government that has the will but...

**SS:** But who knows what will happen later on.

**BL:** It is like what is happening, for example, perhaps in Peru or Bolivia, where there is a strong will and some progress has been made, but there may be a political turn overnight and who knows if that political

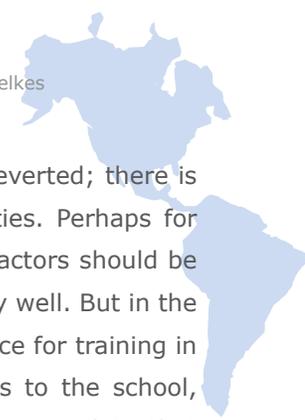
will can be sustained.

**SS:** But, mind you, now that you mention Bolivia and Peru, it is interesting to see – well, not so much in Peru, but in Ecuador in Bolivia, because the position of the aboriginal population there is a **non** intercultural position, it is a pro-indigenous position. And when the lid that has provided for a more harmonious coexistence is removed, so to speak, what is rekindled is ethnic resentment. What is being proposed is a totally pro-indigenous position. It is **much**, much more fundamentalist and claims that ‘What is ours is for us and by us, and is no one else’s business.’ And the Colonial period is **reverted**; there is a reversal in the relationship. That involves a serious problem due to the need to create intercultural realities.

**BL:** During your term in office, were you able to travel a great deal and get to know at first hand what was being done in terms of intercultural education in the Andean countries?

**SS:** Yes, I was in Peru and Bolivia. I had the chance to travel to Bolivia after Evo [Morales] was elected, and the discourse is totally anti-colonialist, it is about a decolonizing education. This perhaps does not mean anything to us, but to them it means absolutely everything. I can recall a big discussion, because they wanted us to sign a document demanding that education in Latin America should be decolonized. I explained to them, ‘But if I bring this to my Undersecretary [of Education], he is not going to understand what I am saying. What does decolonizing mean? What is it about?’ Because for us other processes, such as interculturalization, are much more important. However, two very clear trends do exist there, which are also very **strong** and on the rise: decolonization and interculturalization.

Generally speaking, then, in every case we have to speak of a process of passage, and it’s a process that necessarily deepens democracy. This does not mean you have to wait until you are intercultural in order to be democratic, or the other way around; rather, it



is in the process itself that you gradually deepen the possibilities.

**BL:** Right. Throughout your career you have worked a great deal on the relationship between the school and the community. This has to do with education for democracy, because the concept of social participation has been used a lot as a way of democratizing the school-community relationship. Perhaps you can comment on some changes or challenges regarding this issue of social participation.

**SS:** Yes, I believe that is still to come. The truth is that the proposal for a civic and ethical component of education for democracy in Mexico has been insufficient, because it failed to include the relationship with the community among its objectives. In fact, the latest reform conceives social participation in the same way as the 1993 Act, that is, the Act that makes reference to the Social Participation Councils, which, from my point of view is a step backward in education for democracy.

**BL:** Why do you say that?

**SS:** Because the communities always used to participate through parents' associations – that is, assemblies – that also elected their committee by a direct vote. The committee was then responsible for all the day-by-day issues, but the important decisions were always made at the assembly. Now it happens that the Social Participation Council comes about; this is a very small entity whose members are appointed rather than elected. This is then a step backward, from a democratic point of view. Of course it includes other actors, and this is the advantage; it includes important members of the community, it even includes trade union's representatives, but it has no direct vote.

For the rural communities, this has never been accepted. They are used to a much more communal and **collective** method regarding the school. The Council, then, is not operative; the parents' associations continue to function, unless there is an authoritarian imposition by the school to prevent it. That is the latest

reform, which, as I said, has to be reverted; there is a need to go back to the communities. Perhaps for the benefit of the assemblies, other actors should be invited and listened to; that is all very well. But in the end, that is, **par excellence**, the place for training in democratic participation with regards to the school, and strangely enough it has not been used to that effect.

This is because the Mexican teaching profession has been afraid of community participation; and it is afraid due to insecurity rather than anything else. They are afraid that if they open the door just a bit, the parents are going to walk straight into the classroom and tell them how to teach – as well as being afraid of having a number of things brought to light. However, the parents have never become involved in making a formal petition, that is, in demanding that they should know what their rights and obligations are inside the school, and they should be able to make a strong demand, right? This is something that has never been done, and it is highly necessary.

**BL:** And would it be very difficult for the teachers themselves to teach them their rights?

**SS:** It would also be very difficult for the teachers to teach them their rights, but it is not unusual, because there are cases where the teachers themselves are aware that only with the parents' demand [progress can be made]. Of course, it is necessary for the history of the relationship between the community and the school to have been **very** productive, and have led them to the conviction that this action is necessary.

**BL:** Would it be possible to generalize, let's say, some principles based on those few successful cases...?

**SS:** Let me tell you that many years ago we did an experimental study on the relationship between the rural school and community, and we established several ways of linking the school to the community. The first way was to bring the community into the school from the point of view of the curriculum. That is, how do you manage to bring the reality of the community



into the curriculum so that it becomes its starting point, and the community the place of application of what is learned? The second consisted in working with the parents at the school, so that they would become demanding, initially regarding their **children**, and then regarding the school. Another way was to get the teachers involved in community issues. This certainly never worked, because the conditions did no longer hold. It did work during a very important period in history – that of the missionaries<sup>3</sup>, but after the teachers became professionalized, getting involved in community issues is no longer their business. The last way consisted in having us, as sponsors, work with the community so that the community would make a school diagnosis and propose to the school some improvements. That was really a question of voicing a demand, as directly as that.

In another school we did both things at the same time: having teachers working with parents, and parents working with the school. That was a success, a tremendous success. That was back in 1980. But it did work then. When teachers became aware that parents could actually become their allies, the next step was easier. From my point of view it is possible, and it is the only way, but it has to be developed because otherwise, well, social participation in the school – which is a space where community democracy can be enacted – is going to be distributed unequally. Who are the ones who participate in the school? They are the children of *profesionistas*<sup>4</sup>, who make demands from the school because they know what to ask from it. Therefore, the best schools are those located in urban housing complexes where parents are lower to middle-class salaried *profesionistas* who cannot afford a private school, but who know what the school is and become extremely demanding.

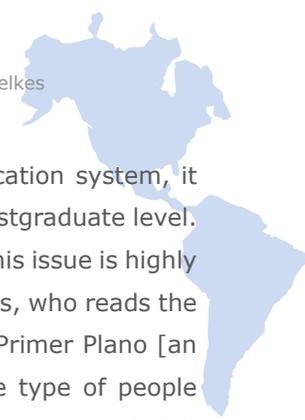
While I was working at the Coordination Office, we put together a project for improving the quality of indigenous education, which we were not able to implement because we had to do it with the DGEI [General Directorate for Indigenous Education] and

it never worked out. But one of the five reasons for the lack of quality in indigenous education was the lack of indigenous participation in the school, and one of the reasons for this is that they [indigenous people] did not attend school, their children are the first generation, then they have no reference point at all to know what to ask and demand from it. We then decided to begin fostering demand from the outside, through radio programs, in their own language, and tell them in their language that “you are entitled to having the teacher who comes to your community speak your own language and its variants.” [And we told them] what their children had to learn in the first, second and third grades, what they had to ask from the school regarding its daily operation, what the teacher’s starting hours are, what his responsibilities vis-à-vis the community are.

But when I arrived in Yucatan, I commented this with the Minister of Education and she told me, “What can I do if someone from a community comes and tells me that the teacher we sent over cannot speak the language of his community or its variant? There is nothing I can do, that is the trade union’s business. I cannot interfere with it.” So, **that’s** where you have to start. Naturally, there is a lot of work to be done in that area. I believe it has a lot to do with the progress of democracy, because the most extensive public space in this country, *par excellence*, is the school. That public space needs to be a democratic space, that is, it has to be used as a democratic space, and not only with the children but also with the communities.

**BL:** Although it is true that the school is *par excellence* the public space to learn democracy, what is the contribution of popular education to democracy? What can popular knowledge and nonformal education outside the school contribute?

**SS:** I believe that popular education makes a fundamental contribution, because it is never solely education, it always has an organizational component. So, it is by way of organization that it contributes to democracy, fundamentally. It is the place where you



learn to participate, you learn to set objectives, you learn to evaluate, you learn to negotiate – because you have that possibility of creating organizations capable of transforming reality, with very clear objectives. And it is those organizations that become schools of democracy much more successfully than when you intend it, and many popular education projects do it intentionally. They use the organizational experience itself as training for democracy based on the organization.

**BL:** Very well. Let's now turn to the question of teachers teaching in democracy. To succeed in having a quality education for democracy, many researchers have claimed that teacher training, both at the initial and refresher training levels, is essential. What is your opinion and recommendation regarding this question of teacher training, mostly with regards to Civic and Ethical Training<sup>5</sup> in the case of Mexico, which is the one you are most familiar with?

**SS:** I feel that our teachers have not been trained in democracy, or in values, or in being subjects aware of being value subjects, and they are still not being trained in this. Perhaps with the exception of those who study to become teachers of Civic and Ethical Training, those who study civic education, or counseling – those are the people who may be trained in a different way. But in general terms, elementary teachers get none of that, and secondary teachers – at present most teachers in secondary schools have not been trained as such; therefore, **neither** did they go through that training as part of their school experience. And refresher training processes do not include any of this, absolutely nothing – well, there may be an exception but generally speaking refresher training processes are those that count for the *Carrera Magisterial*<sup>6</sup> which all teachers are members of.

Training in deep democracy is nearly impossible; it is totally nonexistent. This possibility that minorities have to be listened to, this need to listen to the other even though you may not agree with him, these things that lead to deep democracy – where is all that present?

Nowhere at all. Throughout the education system, it is not at any level, not even at the postgraduate level. Now, outside the education system, this issue is highly reserved for an elite involved in all this, who reads the newspapers critically, who listens to Primer Plano [an opinion program in Channel 11], the type of people who are capable of reflecting on these issues, but it does not exceed 1% of the population, perhaps even less. We have a very serious problem of citizenship education, of democratic education...

Of course teacher training is essential. I am a firm believer in initial teacher training. I believe that if initial teacher training deals with these issues in depth – which is not being accomplished either because those in charge of training are the old traditional type of teachers – but if you started working with universities and these would start making agreements with teacher training institutions and become responsible for this part, it would be wonderful. I am extremely confident in initial training. I feel it is an extremely significant period.

**BL:** But are there some links between universities and teacher training institutions in this regard?

**SS:** No, not yet. Teacher training schools sought to become dependent on secondary education<sup>7</sup> in an attempt to get that to happen, but so far it has not happened. The trade union is reluctant to let them go, so it is going to defend them for a long time; but the cracks will start appearing very soon, and that will eventually become possible. So, I am a firm believer in initial training, because it also has a captive audience, for an extended period of time. You have traineeships and the relationship can be established; in other words, you can send the students to work with their schools, there are lots of things that can be done at teacher training institutions.

I do not believe so much in refresher training – well, in refresher training as we implement it, because taking the teacher out of the classroom to attend a course that is standard for everybody is unrelated with



your actual classroom problems. You need to make an effort both in abstraction and later in application to be able to apply [what you have learned] to your classroom, and that does not happen. What is required is something much closer to their school. And you have to sit together with the teacher to check how he delivers a lesson, where his mistakes lie, what his strong points are, and so on. Well, training teachers in democracy has to be conducted like that, with an adjunct so that the school may become a democratic entity where decisions are made, where people come to a consensus regarding regulations, where sanctions are applied, where simulations of all kinds are made, where efforts are made to reach equity.

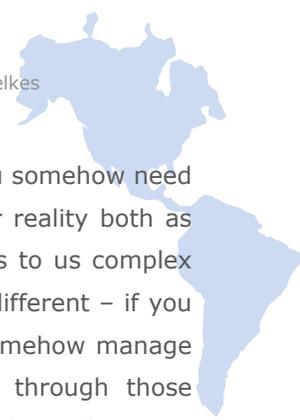
**BL:** And what would need to be changed in order to achieve this kind of training or refresher training? What would have to be done in the Mexican education system?

**SS:** Well, one of the things I've noticed – which I do not like to mention because it sounds too neoliberal – but it is somewhat maddening, is that the same compensation is given to someone who works in the system, who makes efforts, who is determined, who is enthusiastic, who knows what he is doing, who is continually retraining, and who gets results and obtains self-satisfaction, than what is given to someone who is lazy. From the point of view of the system [the striving teacher] is exactly the same as a lazy one. So, there is a very clear problem of incentives that is very demoralizing for teachers. 'Why should I strain myself if this colleague, who makes absolutely no efforts, gets the same?'

The other point is the fact that the education system regards teachers and principals as individuals who should follow instructions, rather than as proficient decision-making professionals. They do not trust them. The entire supervision structure is organized in order to check that they are following instructions. And anything that goes beyond the norm is sanctioned, or deemed to be wrong, or is subject to a remark. This needs to be changed. There are two trends: the system

needs to trust its teachers' professionalism, and has to set the conditions for them to actually become professionalized. Because they are not professionals beforehand, but they do have to start from a basis of trust; otherwise, what happens? That teachers who follow instructions know that they are expected to do just that, because if they are successful, they are going to say, 'the successes are not entirely mine, because I am following instructions, I have very little leeway, my decisions are minimal.' And if they fail, failures are neither theirs, because they say, 'I followed the instructions.' That is very demoralizing. It is true that this happens at all levels – supervisors also have to follow instructions; in other words, everyone, it is a chain. And from my point of view this has to change from the base, and it has to start and move on together with a process of greater autonomy in the schools. As soon as principals and teachers are given more decision-making power, this will provide for more decisions being made at the school and also for much more room for innovation. ...What we need is quite a radical change to the system, because it is not a question of patches, or of different programs; rather, we have to turn things upside down, I believe. Having more of the same is no longer going to lead us to those deep things we want to accomplish.

Now, I have the experience of having trained many generations of teachers in values, in education for democracy, and for citizenship, in very small groups. Of course, there is a question of selectivity involved; those who register are the ones who are interested. But I can tell you that those diploma programs transformed those people for ever. There is no way back. What they do now inside the classroom will never resemble what they used to do before. Their way of addressing the students, of respecting them, of being aware of their individualities, of analyzing diversity in the classroom, and of course of respecting their rights and using the curriculum to train in values and train in democracy – it is a totally different thing. From my experience with these self-selected teachers, they are eager to have something like that, because they are



aware of the fact that they are training in values, and that training in values is exceedingly important, but as they lack the tools to do it, they do not dare say that they are actually doing it.

**BL:** Well, what this anecdote tells me is that, for the time being, perhaps there is no need for a radical change of the whole system, but rather that a single experience that may spark things off, let's say, may have a very significant impact at a later stage.

**SS:** Sure. But there is also a need to give room to acknowledging those sparks, because there are **many**, many indeed. The problem is that they get lost there. But we have to insist that the system should be a resonance box for this type of successful experiences, right?... And I believe there has to be a stimulus. Because this is done **in spite of** the system. Then the argument is that it should not be in spite of the system; rather, the system should have the capacity to understand that, and **support it** and **expand it**, and that is exactly what it fails to do, because it is afraid of having those things happen.

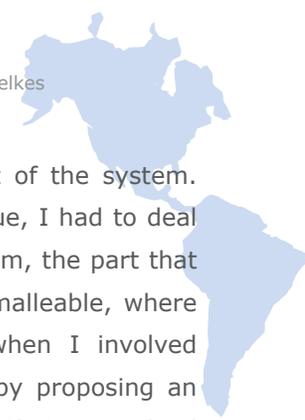
**BL:** Right. Let me ask you a more general question, going back a little to the initial topic. What is your vision of the education and democracy of the future in complex and interconnected knowledge societies? In other words, what are the challenges of education for democracy at a time of full globalization?

**SS:** I believe that the one is fully compatible with the other. It is as if globalization is not going to prevent you from doing that; conversely, it is something that helps you to achieve it. Because to a large extent globalization explains why interculturality becomes important – mostly on account of migrations, mostly because of the fact that at the present time we are not only coexisting with those who are similar to us, but we are also coexisting with those who are different. Also, that coexistence is controversial in itself and that we have to learn to deal with that conflict of coexisting with those who are different, and it is in itself an effect of globalization. What is more, when it

is missing in your own classroom, you somehow need to import it because – as that is our reality both as a nation and globally, and it presents to us complex coexistence between those who are different – if you do not have it, you import it; you somehow manage to have your students virtually go through those experiences. On the other hand, we have the mass media, which also form part of globalization, but it is thanks to globalization that we are in contact with so many cultural and planetary differences and all the rest. That is what we have to take advantage of.

We are going to use the media to that end, we are going to use them creatively, to teach, to read and listen to the media critically. So, you are immersed in globalization, but somehow taking advantage of it critically. Another idea is that of the global village, that you are expected to have your own identity to be able to participate from that identity vis-à-vis a global world. Therefore, you have to be quite sure of what it is that you can contribute, and open up to receive the contribution of others. That is totally intercultural. It is not a coincidence, in my opinion, that we are talking so much about interculturality now that globalization is in place. Then, what added value does it give to you? What is the added value of giving an intercultural approach to this series of phenomena? Basically, I believe it is the perspective of values, the fact that you are considering the others as worthy, as worthy individuals, as worthy cultures, as people who deserve being listened to, as people who are going to teach you precisely on account of your being different. In this manner, viewing globalization from that perspective allows you to assume beforehand that you can learn from the others.

And I believe that the same happens with the “knowledge society” – it is this need to learn how to think and be creative, how to be critical. Finally, that is the knowledge society. What can you contribute to it? How are you going to add value to whatever you do? In a knowledge society, knowledge is presumably used to do new things, to propose different solutions.



That involves linking this to higher thinking abilities, it is a necessary condition to be able to develop true interculturality and democracy.

**BL:** For many years you were a researcher at academic institutes, and then became a public official in charge of the Coordination Office for Intercultural and Bilingual Education. Not long ago you left the Ministry of Public Education to join the academic world again as Head of the Education Department at a highly prestigious university. I believe that this type of political-administrative participation is more usual for Latin American academicians than for those of Anglo-Saxon countries, although there are also remarkable differences among the latter. Could you please tell us something about your experience of this change? How did you solve or negotiate your roles as a researcher and decision-maker? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each role?

**SS:** The two are **very** different things, although at the same time they have to be related. That is to say, the type of abilities required for one and the other are totally different. In principle, the change is extremely difficult, mostly with regards to the ability to deal with political issues, legal issues, and administrative issues. It is as if we researchers were not prepared for any of these three things, not in the least. We do not have the faintest idea. So, that leads to a very long, sometimes **very** painful learning process with a great many failures. In the administrative area, I personally had a **large number** of failures, and the same happened in the political area, because I did not know how to negotiate. And at the Coordination Office you need to negotiate with those who are going to operate the national education system.

**BL:** Can you give us an example of when and how you failed in this issue of negotiating? And how did you realize that you had failed?

**SS:** For example, in the intercultural curriculum for everyone<sup>9</sup>. I had more failures than successes in everything concerning “for everyone,” because there

I was forced to deal with the heart of the system. While working on the indigenous issue, I had to deal with the indigenous part of the system, the part that is somewhat more sensitive, more malleable, where innovations are more likely. But when I involved myself in the heart of the system by proposing an intercultural curriculum for everyone, that was indeed **very** difficult. I cannot say they were outright failures, but in all certainty I can say that we achieved only 20% of what we had intended to achieve. It was all about negotiations, about litigations, about struggles.

I remember very well, for example, when secondary language teachers were there – we began interculturalization at the secondary level – they handed me a syllabus that only read: Spanish and English. And then I asked them, “What about the indigenous language?” “That is not our business,” they replied. “Is it not? Then whose business is it? Because there is a law that states that, is there not? That indigenous people are entitled to studying in their own language throughout elementary education. And here we are talking about secondary education, right?” “Oh, don’t tell me it is my business.” “Yes, it is.” And of course they never became accountable for that. That is why we had to include it as an optional subject; that is the way it remained. It is very complex. In the case of the hard sciences – for physics, chemistry and biology – it was impossible to make them realize that there was knowledge from the indigenous world that could be included in a science textbook. It was absolutely impossible. Curiously enough, though, they were the people with whom we made most progress. Curiously, and after a long time and many discrepancies, but they were the ones with whom we made progress.

With regards to history, we had to make them realize that there were many histories in Mexico depending on where they were experienced, and that those histories had to be given a chance to be told, and to be confronted. **Uf**, but no, it was impossible. The vision of the official history is absolute, invulnerable, it was impossible to talk about multiple histories.



So, in each area of the curriculum there was a set of problems, and the bottom line is that, well, I believe we succeeded in 20%. Generally speaking it is difficult to get to achieve things, because you are in the heart of the system, with people who have never thought of diversity, who have this racism totally assimilated, who are not aware that it is racism, right? That is why I attribute many of my failures to the racism embedded in the legislation, in the structures, unconsciously in individuals.

Going back to your question, I was aware that while I was engaged in public office I needed to make available all the knowledge I had acquired during my academic training. I had it absolutely clear, and from that point of view I feel that it was a marvelous experience. It was marvelous to be able to use, to get to the application stage, an application from a **high** level, with a **strong** likely impact. However, I also had many certainties, because when you have doubts it must be very complex. But I had many certainties of what had to be done. I started by linking the work I had previously done on values and on quality in education, with interculturality, and with school autonomy, and with professional teacher training processes. And it all harmonized very well. The third point is that I had the certainty that when I delved into dark terrains, and there were many of them, I would not be able to do without research, that I had to resort to the researchers, to ask the people who were there to help me. That also endows public office with a different way of looking at things. You do not take a single step until you have **some** evidence, albeit very partial. But first 'Go to the evidence.' And then you stop the story of 'you are not going to have it because you are a public official and have no time,' but resort to those who do know. The other characteristic refers to evaluation, which comes at the end. Well, from the beginning there is a concern present: where will this lead me to? How can I determine whether this is the right way? But towards the end of your term of office, we are going to evaluate the whole term, thing by thing. I want to know where we went wrong, whether

we are embarked on a path that shows me certain trends, what the obstacles are, etc. We do evaluate the most important things.

Those are the characteristics that I believe I was able to impress on public office, thanks to the fact that I was coming from the academic milieu, and from the research milieu.

**BL:** Based on your experience in this administrative/political/legal field, do you some advice for your academic colleagues on how their research can have a stronger impact in favor of a democratic education, of a quality education?

**SS:** It is difficult, but I do believe it is very important for researchers to have that ability to *feel*, to see where public policy is heading to, in order to be able to have an impact on it. ...It is necessary for your research – both historical and current – to be able to improve the public policy process that will confer it a particular regime. That is also what my own experience has taught me – each regime is very different. In Mexico there is no state policy in education. This entails that educational policies are the government's doing, with no societal participation. This explains the resulting lack of continuity in educational policies. Therefore, I believe that one of the things that we researchers need to learn is to fight for that; in other words, to get those decisions that were made in that administration, **based** on research, remain unchanged because they were based on research. That is the other point, how we can prevent that pendulum swing [the oscillations in public policy].

**BL:** And now that you have returned to academic life... ?

**SS:** It has been a bit tricky, because I was coming at full speed and now I find that academic life is quite slower (laughter). But no, I am very happy now that I have returned to academic life, because that gives me the possibility of gauging things again. You have your spaces for reflection, discussion with colleagues. That is a delight. And that is something I never experienced throughout my term in office.



## Notes

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- 1** Soon after the interview, Professor Schmelkes became the Director of the Instituto de Investigaciones para el Desarrollo de la Educación at the same Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City.
- 2** In Mexico, teaching periods in secondary education (grades 7 through 9) are called “teaching hours” and have a duration of 50 minutes so as to give teachers the chance to change classrooms in between subjects.
- 3** The Mexican Rural School project was designed just after the creation of the Ministry of Public Education, after the Mexican Revolution. This project sent teachers over to the rural communities to teach children and adults. Teachers were assisted in their training by the Cultural Missions, which were also involved in intense and in-depth educational work in such communities. These teachers were called “missionaries,” because their work was deemed to be kind of educational “apostleship.”
- 4** In Mexico a “profesionista” generally holds a first degree and works in a professional capacity.
- 5** Civic and Ethical Training as a school subject was introduced in secondary education in 1998, integrating two subjects: Civic Education and Counseling. For the first time in many decades, ethics was to be discussed again at the school level. The teachers, however, who were either counselors or civic education teachers, were not trained in teaching this new subject. At present this subject will also be taught, with that name, at the elementary school level.
- 6** “Carrera Magisterial” (public teaching service) is a merit-based compensation system that teachers qualify for by producing evidence of teaching expertise, evidence of planning and evaluation work, and through their students’ performance in standardized tests. It consists of five tiers, each of which means a substantial salary increase as compared to the next tier down.
- 7** The Ministry of Public Education was restructured in 2005. The significant changes included the transfer of the then Dirección General de Normatividad, responsible for teacher training schools, from the Subsecretaría de Educación Básica (Office of the Under-Secretary of Elementary Education) to the Subsecretaría de Educación Superior (Office of the Under-Secretary of Secondary Education). It was renamed Dirección General de Educación Superior para Profesionales de la Educación (DGESPE) (General Directorate of Secondary Education for Education Professionals).
- 8** The purpose of the CGEIB is two-fold. The first consists in providing a culturally and linguistically relevant education to indigenous people at all education levels. The second has to do with providing intercultural education to the entire population, at all education levels as well. The intercultural curriculum for everyone is part of this objective.