



History of school subjects: reflection on theoretical and methodological aspects of historiographical practice

*História das disciplinas escolares: reflexão sobre aspectos teórico-
metodológicos de uma prática historiográfica*

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Abstract

The history of school subjects, one of the newest branches in the history of education, is providing a new look to the act of teaching school subjects. One of its main representatives, the French historian André Chervel, believes that the subjects are school productions set to transform teaching into learning. Closely linked to the school culture, the establishment of a subject is surrounded by moments of stability and transformation, or by impact of educational reform, curriculum reorganization, public change, either by changing the teaching method. Aiming to reflect on the theoretical and methodological basis of this historiographical practice, this study examines the close coordination of school subjects with the school culture in terms of relation between rules and purposes governing the

school, teacher professionalization, forms of acquire the content. It also examines concepts that allow us to understand how school subjects are conceived as autonomous entities, produced inside the school.

Keywords: History of school subjects. School culture. Theoretical and methodological basis

Resumo

A história das disciplinas escolares, uma das mais recentes ramificações da história da educação, vem proporcionando um novo olhar ao ensino dos conteúdos escolares. Um de seus principais representantes, o historiador francês André Chervel, considera que as disciplinas são produções escolares configuradas para transformar o ensino em aprendizagem. Estreitamente articulada à cultura escolar, a constituição de uma disciplina é permeada por momentos de estabilidade e transformação, seja por impacto de reformas educacionais, de reorganização curricular, de alteração do público, seja por mudança de método de ensino. Com o objetivo de refletir sobre a base teórico-metodológica dessa prática historiográfica, o estudo analisa a estreita articulação das disciplinas escolares com a cultura escolar, em termos de relações entre normas e finalidades que regem a escola, profissionalização docente, formas de apropriação dos conteúdos. Analisa também conceitos que possibilitam compreender o funcionamento interno das disciplinas escolares concebendo-as como entidades autônomas, produzidas no interior da escola.

Palavras-chave: História das disciplinas escolares. Cultura escolar. Base teórico-metodológica.

Initial considerations

The Chervel's study (1990) on the history of school subjects, with a significant movement in Brazil, is based on the assumption that school is a place of creation, rather than reproducing values and disciplines that are produced within the school in its relations with the scholar culture.

Having as a horizon the scholar culture, the culture that shapes a kind of knowledge, scholar knowledge, the history of school

subjects has been presented in the scientific field as a new branch of the history of education that is giving visibility to the school trajectory of knowledge, its constitution and educational purposes to fulfill in different historical periods.

Reflecting about the constitution of school subjects in Europe, a renowned French historian, Dominique Julia says that until some years ago the education history was focused on, in general terms, to a political and educational history of the great things, the times of struggles between churches and states in what the education needed to be positioned itself in favor or against the Jesuits and the French Revolution. For this historian, only recently, from the 60s of the twentieth century, a period that marks the progress of the democratization process in high school education is that the history of education focuses on the relationship between academic achievement and socio-cultural heritage. However, even more recently that historiography looks began to drive to the processes of teaching different school subjects to the actual teaching practices of different times, for the functioning of the different teaching contents, expression of a scholar culture. Seeking new understandings and different meanings about the doings and purposes fulfilled by the school, the researchers present nestling this historiography - increasingly, in producing a company committed to the circulation of cultural objects, with the establishment of relationships between school knowledge history, with representations by subject, scholar times and in different spaces.

In Brazil, the renewal of the history of education has advanced by means of the history of school subjects¹ in relation to the production of historical knowledge of the practices that take place within the school bringing new problematizations about scholar students' knowledge.

¹ An important theme is the reference book *História das Disciplinas Escolares no Brasil: contribuições para o debate*, organized by Marcus Aurelius Taborda de Oliveira and Maria Fischer Serlei Ranzi (OLIVIRA; RANZI, 2003).

In this article, the purpose is to reflect on the theoretical and methodological bases of this investigative endeavor, running instances of a story that Chervel (1990) calls “history of teaching” or the history of school subjects, a troubled history in understanding practices and representations that give sense for a school discipline².

History of school subjects and scholar culture

In practice historian in this mode there is no separation between theory and methodology. The choice of historic tools justified in itself, its methodological affiliation with a cultural history. When conceptualizing polysemous terms involved in its historiographical operation, as the concept of culture, strong idea of this historical approach, a word that in essence refers to culture, ancient use of the term associated with the work of the earth by man. To Ory (2004), the word culture is used later in the German intellectual tradition as *Kultur*, a form of civilization. According to the same author, in a qualified definition of anthropological culture boils down to a set of own company representations and coherent meaning of a cultural history would be the form of an expression, whereas “the representative is to put a priori functioning translatable, less through a spatial metaphor – two levels – more through time - two stroke, is mainly to emphasize a dynamic that unite them, distinguishes” (ORY, 2004, p. 9). Another important emphasis given by the author the cultural history is that the representation carries the meaning exhumation (anthropological sense), as distinguished from others by integrating principles of literature as to require, as a literary text, a paratext. The author notes: “at this moment I do not write a book, I write a text which in successive stages, from the editor till the bookseller, became in that instant what you read, a book” (p. 14). It is a story whose major

² The word “school discipline” in the text is considered as a component of the curriculum of a course, according to Chervel (1990) is it that organizes the teaching within the school.

contribution to the educational field “truths” crystallized in relation to cultural objects. Taking the example of scholar mathematics, a strong representation still present in the society is to be considered by many as a wonder to few, born with the “gift” to mathematical representation generally reinforced in school environments. Hence the importance when working from the perspective of cultural history to understand the meaning of terms like “tradition”, “representation”, “ownership”, “school culture”, “backgrounds”, “development”, “progress”, among others.

To Valente (2013, p. 47-48):

The fact is that the relationship that mathematics educators have maintained with time favors the future. In the past-present-future triad, the ratio accentuates the future. Thus, the discourses constructed, coming from researches, point to inevitable prescriptions, ending into teleology. This is possibly due to the reified construction of the past. The prevailing ideas that point to progress, as it is notorious occur when there is a reference to the mathematical output. Thus, new theories, new perspectives, rather than by imposing a careful reading of the situation that is current in the present, they serve as remedies to cure the diseases of the past. On behalf of the ideal of progress, the past presents itself, always, as less wise than this, and this, of course, less educated than the future.

In this time relation, pointed by that author, the researches tend to emphasize the prescriptive character, indicating that there is a rise in the quality of teaching, terms like “evolution” and “progress” are recurrent. However, when designing the complexity of reality, this strand recognizes the actions of the people in the description of the discontinuities that mark the relationship between present and past, a story that does not understand this as a true copy of the past, but that “reinvents traditions” as reminds the historian Eric Hobsbawm.

By ‘reinvented tradition’ means a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules; such practices, ritual or symbolic

nature, are intended to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies, a continuity with the past (HOBSBAWAM; RANGER, 2008, p. 9).

Thinking about the “reinvention” of school practices that assume a priori thinking of “invented traditions are important symptoms and therefore indicators of problems that otherwise could not be detected or located in time. “They are evidence”, says Hobsbawm (p. 20) that it is a process in which all historians are involved and helps to create, demolish and restructure images from the past, a dimension that also permeates the activities of the educator.

These placements help to understand that many of the statements, taken as true, are but false statements, representations crystallized from sources not from subject to the scrutiny of a historic status. About the importance of explaining the “how and why” the continuity of movement of certain stereotypes and representations between individuals in the book whose title is a question: *What is the story today?*³, reading directed by Laurentin work (2010), there is an iconic statement (p. 105) of one of the interviewees, the French historian of contemporary history, Daniele Voldman says: “Looking forward to what was, not what we would like, demands on labor and pain, but this is the way to freedom” (our translation). It reflects that leads to some sources used in traditional history, school productions, supplies, bearing evidence of the mechanisms engendered in school how to teach certain content.

In addition to official documents, the location of the school documents as individual education plans, lists of students, school events, minutes of meetings of teachers, textbooks, among others, is to enter the “black box” of the school trying to see traces, selection patterns and treatment of subjects to be taught, a new investigative practice has been mobilizing new looks for school.

³ *At quoi sert l'histoire aujourd'hui?* Work directed by Emmanuel Laurentin and published in France in 2010 by Éditions Bayard.

This is an investigative approach that since the 1960s has been consolidated in several countries in order to seek greater transparency of relations between norms and practices developed by the school in the education of citizens, at long last, to understand the culture of a school time and space.

Methodological challenges in the history of school subjects

A first challenge that this history puts into the historian is the choice of documents containing traces of cultural practice investigated. In the case of school culture, documents of interest to the researcher are the bearers of standards, codes and school conduct. School subjects, understood as a cultural product, responsible for transmitting content and school knowledge in addition to its programmatic role, are also formed by the didactic-pedagogical apparatus that guides their teaching. Designed as a school building, a school discipline, by the codes created for its functioning, helps to shape school culture. From this perspective, teaching practices from the perspective of cultural history are cultural practices, an area of excellence filled with relevant codes to be deciphered in a history of school subjects. However, the history of cultural practices is the most difficult to reconstruct, as Julia points out (2001), there are practices that do not leave traces. But, recognizing the limitation of location of school productions, the historian recommends “making any arrow stick”, proposing to examine different materials such as educational records of students and teachers that are contained in the textbooks, supplies that may be collated with educational reforms and prescribed for teaching with the intent of producing a history of a discipline programs, noting that the legislative texts must always send us to practice.

A school discipline is not only composed of the program content, this is not the only channel of access to its internal structure and the purpose it is taken in education, as stated Chervel (1990), the contents are only means used to achieve an end and an ideal time for this is when a school

discipline is the subject to some change, when new goals are prescribed them and new goals are imposed on them by the political situation or renewal of the educational system. Refers to the author, amenable to investigate a discipline, a crisis in which the main actor in the history of the disciplines - the teacher goes in search of solutions to address the changes in time, because in these moments is that the real purpose reveal themselves in teaching. And the investigations of this problem must address the complex pedagogical apparatus that guides the teaching of a discipline, for example the justifications of the proposed changes in the relationships between old and new, the consistency of procedures in relation to new purposes. Such assumptions are shared by Julia (2001, p. 15) when characterized as a school culture as those whose understanding requires analysis of standards and purposes of the school, the professionalization of teachers, content and also taught school practices.

Another historian of school disciplines is the Spanish Viñao Frago (2008, p. 204) that states that to be investigated as a “living organism” and not as “abstract, universal and static entity” as “appropriation” of a professional body recognized by their training, school subjects cannot be studied separately from the main agents that give them life - teachers. It also argues that the author consider subjects as a “living organism”, it is justified because (they) “are born and grow, evolve and transform, disappear, swallow each other, attract and repel, break away and come together, compete, interact and interchange information (or borrow from others) etc..

With regard to the writing of the history of the disciplines, in the phase of the historiographical operation, the narrative is presented as a challenge to the historian, perhaps the most vulnerable part of the study to reveal, beyond good footfalls, the stumbling walk. To make the narrative of facts, historians remind us that every action has a historical process, a plot.

According to Prost (2008), a historical text is full when he constructs a plot whose structure indicates what is intended to demonstrate and not to prepare a report, to narrate a story that provides explanations. What differentiates a historical text from the others, are the signals used to argue. In the case of historical text, notes and

quotes are its most typical “marks of historicity” evidence materials that make it acceptable, verifiable. Prost notes that a footnote rather than a guarantee of control, expresses its scientific evidence of an “argument from authority” (p. 240).

How Prost (2008, p.244) reminds the historian explains and argues, using concepts, analyzing, separating the object into parts, describing details, reflects, as it goes, is an intellectual activity, is history. And to re-present the past, the historian uses “proper” historically words, linking meaning to the designation and writing.

It is evident the dilemma of the historian: it uses the current terms and is easily understood, although it is a necessarily skewed understanding, erroneous, and ends up falling in anachronism, the cardinal sin of the historian (L. Febvre). Or, makes use of words in the past, speaks of commoner and tenant, official and sublime, in which case you run the risk of not being understood because these words are meaningless to our contemporaries. Who knows, now, what was a sublime time (1870) Denis Poulot? (PROST, 2008, p. 251).

This problem of double meaning of a word, a challenge that Prost (2008) suggests to be overcome by formulating a metatext. This occurs when the historian provides an explanation in a footnote, to include in the text or item makes a first appearance in the term (p. 251). The act of introducing an explanatory comment in the margins of the narrative shows that the writing of history also adopts rules scientificity of other sciences, making it a strict and ingenious task, which is equivalent to state that the story is not only written, is also a style of writing.

The methodological intricacies of the history of school subjects

Like every investigative approach, the history of school subjects carries a conception of history, cultural history, shed designed by Chartier (1990) and the history of practices and representations, a story whose

characteristics lead to a conception of history as a representation and not a copy of a past that even doesn't exist anymore, has left traces that might reveal uses (appropriations) that the people made use from cultural objects that were available to them. To the author, two central concepts underlie cultural history: representation and practice. Untangling documents that bear the marks of a historical past is an essential task of the historian's craft, in the case of the historian of disciplines, assumes locate and discuss representations to understand that contours were given to education, use (appropriation) of cultural objects to practices that competed in conformation or processing of a specific culture, engendered within the school by the subjects involved.

Using Prost (2007) we see that the historical explanation is always relational. It is in the structure of the text, in the construction of the historian response question. It is not based on implicit, but in arguments that can give visibility to the research objective. According to the historian, the setting is of the plot that allows us to understand how to articulate the different levels of explanation. As a master key to the whole story, the plot is that, when putting together events in an intelligible whole, gives clarity and visibility to the explanation, giving mainly meaning to history. As a process, the plot does not consist in describing a list of facts, but in the chain of arguments, assertions that may be demonstrable (proven), producing a historiographical discourse that differs from a simple "storytelling". This is what confers a scientific history, but a story and a story, the story is argumentative discourse, subject to a method, therefore, is a theory (PINTO, 2010, p. 53).

As Certeau (1994) observes, practices are permeated by "strategies" of power and "tactics" creative consumption, conflicting relationships present in a school culture in the official requirements for the imposition of standards, or by the creative use of these standards in which on standard practice, the "powerless" move from survival tactics.

The story of a school discipline requires the use of different sources that allow reconstructing placed in confrontation representations,

creating a plot in which changes, stagnation and even extinction of a discipline in the educational project of the school are identified.

It is essential to state that the whole history of school subjects should, in one motion, taking into account the obvious and implicit goals pursued, the teaching contents and ownership held by students as can be verified by their work and exercises. There is constant interaction between these three competing poles, three, in the constitution of a discipline, and would be directly sentenced to serious unknowns are belittling any of them (JULIA, 2000, p. 60).

However, searching purposes of education is not something simple, they never show up directly and are not easily accessible explicit. In the case of a subject taught in a course at any given historical period, from a particular educational project, the goals are not well defined, are always complex and the search of its evidence requires a more refined analysis involving various approaches to established sources.

This study aimed to understand the purposes of the two disciplines of mathematics education, Complements of Mathematics and Educational Statistics, in 1950 offered courses in pedagogy, a time when educators were allowed to teach mathematics discipline in the first cycle of secondary education (gymnasium), Pinto (2013) found that the programming discipline Complements of Mathematics did not prepare future educators to teach classes in the old gym. The classes, taught by engineers in general, intended to provide a prerequisite (a supplement) for Educational Statistics course that was offered in the following year, disciplines whose presence in the training curriculum of the teacher expressed the government's investment in ensuring the scientific basis of the profession, providing the instrumental support to the future educator to compare, administer the education and education in numbers stroke.

In a time of Survey and New School in the National Institute for Educational Studies Teixeira - Inep, drove the research and had a

professional prepared to understand the Brazilian educational reality, “in numbers”, complemented by the Statistical Mathematics would give to this professional, top-level status, the professional with the ability to think the educational reality of their country. In addition to the transmitter teacher mathematical content model, engineers trainers who taught Mathematics ensured the contribution to Educational Statistics claimed its purpose in the course of Pedagogy, configured as instrumental for pedagogue “scientifically profess” of their teaching (PINTO, 2013, p. 25771).

A question, not less but very important, goes around the purposes of a discipline refers to the impacts brought by education reforms, in particular, the implications of changing public, educational materials, changes in curriculum organization. Of the changes mentioned, which one has caused greater impact into a discipline?

Oliveira Filho (2013) in a study tried to understand how the scholar mathematics was composed from 1930 to 1970, the historical period in which this discipline may have been impacted by four major education reforms⁴, the author began analyzing the legislation of the period, the permanence and transformations required for the discipline, held a refined analysis on the issues of textbooks that have circulated during the period and were carefully selected for the study by locating the various editions published between. He searched the discipline in the books. How?

We went to the didactic books to, get into it, we could see the discipline, and the way the content was presented and offered to the readers, students, what we call the method of presenting content. The categories of analysis in didactic books were given by Chervel (1990),

⁴ At the Reform Francisco Campos (1931), the school was renamed itself *2º Ciclo do Ensino Secundário-Curso Complementar*, lasting two years and offered in three modes: Pre-Law, Pre-Medical and Pre-Polytechnic, in Gustavo Reform Capanema (1942) modalities offered by the course were changed: going to be called Classical or Scientific; Guidelines on Basic Law of National Education (1961) the course came back to be called *Colegial*, lasting three years, in the 5692 Law / 71 the course *Colegial* was named *Segundo Grau* course, lasting for three years (OLIVEIRA FILHO, 2013).

since we sought discipline in textbooks and not in history textbooks (OLIVEIRA FILHO, 2013, p. 158).

In development from the survey made in the perspective of the history of school subjects, Oliveira did not neglect to weave the constituted sources, confront legislation with educational programs, programs with textbooks, textbooks with professional careers of its authors seeking in selected materials, evidence of purposes of mathematics taught at school and forms of ownership of the programs put in circulation in demarcated period. With this, he was able to show that at the beginning, from the *Reform Francisco Campos*, the discipline was not formed yet, because it was a diffuse phase in which the contents were unstable. The next moment (Capanema Reform), in which a new program had more integrated units, with the movement of a vulgate⁵, 1943-1961, it was indicating a more stable content in which the authors of the books followed a programmatic standard for the Mathematics at school. With such evidence the period 1952 to 1960, was known as the stability phase of discipline, well justified by the adoption of the Minimum Program, established in 1951 by Capanema. Regarding the last stage investigated, the study indicates a loss of stability of the discipline with the arrival of the New Math Movement (MMM) and absence of the ways in which the authors appropriated Modern Mathematics⁶.

A particularity of this story, when it is worth of textbooks, as is pointed by Ory (2004), is not to omit the importance given to the measurable:

⁵ In the history of school subjects it is important to bring evidence of the presence of second Chervel Vulgate (1990), a key element in the investigation of the constitution of a discipline, when analyzing textbooks.

⁶ Numerous historical researches on MMM, conducted by researchers from the Research Group on the History of Mathematics Education Ghemat, indicate that the movement penetrated in Brazilian schools, primarily in the junior courses in the early 1960s and one of its greatest disseminators was Osvaldo Sangiorgi, renowned professor and author of mathematics textbooks.

So we can always approach a phenomenon to the cultural success by less than absolute respect for these relative indices, for example, reprints, translations, adaptations, deviations and other complaints, recurrence of a theme, the diffusion of a number vocabulary, including institutions etc. (ORY, 2004, p. 15, our translation).

This space is more measurable than desirable, necessary when the study proposes to go in search of the quantitative evidence of published editions, as was the doctoral thesis of Villela (2009) seated on historical production of textbooks of mathematics, with the two object collections “flagships”⁷, published by the National Publishing Company, in the days of the New Math Movement, 1960s and 1970s. One originality of the study was to scour the files from the publisher, considered at the time, the most significant of the country in relation to publications of textbooks, mapping quantitative and seeking to understand the publishing success since its protagonists, chief editor, authors and illustrators, whose testimony brought unpublished revelations about the “behind the scenes” of the production of an instructional manual process, highlighting the involvement and commitment of staff to the degree product quality, an element that would justify the success of the collections not only innovated in the contents, as well as present and working mathematical concepts, rationalities putting in circulation arising from the New Math movement.

Another aspect considered very important in the methodological construction of the story in question is when the researcher dialogues with the school materiality to “see” traces, tracks, signals that contribute to the construction of the response to the central question formulated, an aspect that will allow the “thick description” (GEERTZ, 1989) and ensure intelligibility about the plot built.

⁷ Collections of Modern Mathematics, highlighted by Villela (2009) as that achieved the most success in the National Company Publisher: Mathematics-Course Modern for junior series, written by Osvaldo Sangiorgi and Modern Course in Mathematics for Teaching 1st Grade (GRUEMA) that between 1964 and 1980 showed, respectively, a quantitative of 6,056,859 and 4,213,559 copies (p. 139)

The attention given by the history of school subjects to textbooks, does not mean that the book is a preferred historical source. The importance of the textbook as a historical source was masterfully analyzed by Choppin (2004), in the state of the art on textbooks, reference text for researchers, especially to historians. It is what presents the study of Costa (2010) aimed to understand the concept of numbers predominantly in the textbooks of arithmetic period from 1890 to 1946, Brazilian authors and books most of which were located in the File Emmnauelle, organized by Alain Choppin. The temporality of the study was justified by the importance of landmarks for Arithmetic discipline of Brazilian primary school - Appearance of School Groups in Brazil (1890), one of the most important educational innovations that occurred in the late nineteenth century and the enactment of the Organic Law on Education primary (Decree -Law n. 8529 to January 2, 1946). The originality of the study is given by the interrelationships that the author establishes between textbooks, teaching manuals and educational magazines, around the object of study, how the concept of number was appropriated by the authors of books for primary school arithmetic. The analysis of textbooks focused on the content, methods, and characteristics of the proposed exercises and also in the social position occupied by the authors, culminating in the predominant representations of the concept investigated.

Final considerations

To think about theoretical and methodological aspects of the history of school subjects, the study sought to focus its analysis on the internal logic of this investigative modality, tracing routes, discussing concepts, emphasizing relationships, gathering lines to compose the landscape of history announced, in a story that puts relief school culture, a set of sayings and doings of reinvented standards in practice, by the actions of the main protagonists of school subjects, teachers and students.

In this theoretical and methodological construction was highlighted the creative role of the school, in the production of cultural

forms of disciplining citizens, showing the reverse of the chevallardian studies, the impossibility of using the concept of “didactic transposition” when it comes to understanding the historical past of a school discipline, by considering that the insertion of scientific knowledge in school is not only didactic intervention taken by the syllabus. To also recognize as scientific pedagogical knowledge, the story of “teachings” Pedagogy as a science conceives intervening with its own rationality in the formation of the subject. A new foundation in the initial or continuing teacher education, not because it was absent from the educational agenda, but because it provides a new look to the horizon past, present and future of the role that school discipline fulfilled, fulfill and will fulfill in the population schooling.

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