

Innovating in Education: the process of building a successful discourse

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ABSTRACT – Innovating in Education: the process of building a successful discourse¹. The discourse of educational innovation has become a guiding principle of school policies, often presenting innovation as the only solution to the problems of the educational system. This article offers a critical analysis of the origin and development of this discourse in the educational field between the 1970s and 1990s, showing how an economic and uncritical notion of innovation was promoted, subordinating pedagogical aims to other purposes and making an educational rethinking necessary today.

Keywords: Education. Educational Theories. Educational Discourses. Educational Innovation.

RESUMEN – Innovar en Educación: el proceso de construcción de un discurso exitoso. El discurso de la innovación educativa se ha consolidado como principio rector de las políticas escolares, defendiendo en numerosas ocasiones la innovación como única solución a los problemas del sistema. Este artículo analiza críticamente el origen y desarrollo de este discurso en el campo educativo entre las décadas de 1970 y 1990, mostrando cómo se promovió una noción economicista y acrítica de la innovación, que subordinó los fines pedagógicos a otros, siendo hoy necesario un replanteamiento educativo.

Palabras-clave: Educación. Teorías Educativas. Discursos Educativos. Innovación Educativa.

Introduction: innovation as an imperative in education

As Aibar (2023) argues, “innovation is now presented as the only path forward, as the best solution to virtually any contemporary challenge or problem: from climate change to public health, from poverty to education” (p. 19). This is consistent with the productivist socioeconomic model underpinning our globalized world. Such a model is fundamentally based on a competitive dynamic of constant production and consumption, and nothing fuels this dynamic more effectively than innovation, creating new commodities that promise increasingly improved responses to our needs, regardless of whether those needs are real or constructed (Keucheyan, 2021).

In the specific field of education, innovation has for some years now constituted a key line of action in reform processes developed on a global scale to adapt education systems to the needs and societies of the twenty-first century (Hallgarten, et al., 2015). Indeed, this is the case to such an extent that the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a highly influential international organization in the shaping of educational policy, has come to define innovation as an imperative (OECD, 2016); that is, as a goal that must necessarily be pursued.

The emergence of this discourse of educational innovation as an imperative, now highly successful, yet ultimately not primarily oriented toward strictly educational aims (Solé Blanch, 2020), can be traced back to the 1950s and 1960s. From that period onward, both academic and operational approaches to educational innovation began to take shape, displaying diverse and multifaceted nuances. Some emphasized social justice and the struggle against inequality (Fullan, 1982), while others conceived innovation as a driver of economic development (Cogan, 1976). In any case, both perspectives underscored the role of educational policy as an agent of change and were grounded in a conception of education that sought to move beyond traditional models, redefining its aims in terms of the acquisition of new competencies within a changing context.

The main aim of this article is to analyze the process through which the discourse of innovation was introduced and disseminated within the field of education, the conception that emerged from it, the objectives it pursued, and, from a pedagogical perspective, to identify both the achievements and the shortcomings that characterized this development. The review has been limited to publications dated between the 1970s and the 1990s, in line with previous research indicating that from the 1970s onward the theoretical foundations of educational innovation became broadly consolidated, making it possible, by the turn of the century, to unequivocally attest to its success (Maldonado-Mariscal; Alijew, 2023).

The article is therefore structured into four sections. First, the methodology employed for the search and analysis is described. Second, the emergence of the discourse of innovation as an imperative linked to economic logics is examined, highlighting the significant

role played by international organizations such as the OECD and UNESCO. Third, the predominant theoretical approaches to educational innovation between the 1970s and 1999 are analyzed, exploring how their foundations, justifications, meanings, and key actors have evolved over time. Finally, the article concludes with a reflection and proposal concerning the consequences of the innovation imperative and the current tensions between instrumental and educational rationalities from a pedagogical perspective.

Methodology

The methodology employed was a scoping review, that is, a systematic and comprehensive mapping of the available scientific literature on the concept of educational innovation and its use during the period under study (Arksey; O'Malley, 2005). To ensure transparency and replicability, detailed information is provided regarding the flow of the search and selection process across its different phases, following the PRISMA framework. This includes an initial identification stage (preliminary search), a second screening stage (in-depth review), and a final inclusion stage in which documents are selected according to a set of previously specified and justified criteria (Sánchez-Serrano et al., 2022).

During the identification phase, searches were conducted in Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, Google Scholar, and JSTOR. An initial search in WoS and Scopus using the terms “innovación educativa” (in Spanish) and “educational innovation” (in English) yielded zero results in Spanish in both databases and fewer than 300 results in English. The limited number of references identified revealed the constraints of major databases in relation to the temporal scope of the study (1970–1999). On the one hand, many leading educational journals from that period are not indexed and have not been incorporated into international databases. On the other hand, a significant portion of the academic production on the topic was disseminated in formats that are not typically indexed today, such as books, printed conference proceedings, or technical research reports.

This situation led to the expansion of the search to Google Scholar and JSTOR. Google Scholar returned a very high number of references (more than 16,000 in English), making rigorous selection extremely difficult. As a result, the research team decided to discard this source, given the challenges involved in ensuring minimum scientific quality. Consequently, JSTOR was selected as a primary repository. JSTOR, a digital archive with a strong focus on the humanities and social sciences, has, since the 1990s, undertaken the digitization of earlier issues of highly recognized and prestigious academic journals that previously existed only in print. The precision of the document and source characteristics found there proved to be both academically reliable and manageable. Accordingly, combining searches in established international databases with those conducted in JSTOR, the initial corpus consisted of 2,557 texts in English and 46 in Spanish.

The second phase involved the removal of duplicates and a manual screening process based on the following eligibility criteria: that the studies pertained to non-university educational settings; that they were not limited to specific didactic experiences; that they were not focused on a particular disciplinary area; and that they exhibited a conceptual orientation. Prior to this manual screening, the filters “academic articles” and “education” (as a field of knowledge) were applied, reducing the total number of documents to 1,716. After the manual screening in accordance with the aforementioned criteria, a total of 101 documents were included: 53 from JSTOR (10 in Spanish and 43 in English), 20 from Web of Science, and 28 from Scopus (the latter two exclusively in English).

In addition, the database and digital repository search was complemented by applying the so-called snowballing method based on the texts initially identified. This method constitutes a qualitative strategy for document retrieval that involves identifying new sources through the references cited in an initial set of relevant texts (backward snowballing), or by exploring subsequent works that cite them (forward snowballing) (Wohlin, 2014). This technique is particularly appropriate when addressing, as in the present case, a period in which academic production was not systematically indexed (Gierczyk et al., 2024). Its application made it possible to reconstruct more comprehensively the genealogy and evolution of the discourse of educational innovation, seeking to avoid biases inherent in dominant citation networks and to ensure the exhaustiveness and representativeness of the documentary corpus. As a result, an additional 22 documents were selected, increasing the total number of texts included in the analysis to 123.

The following tables present the entire process and its results in detail.

Table 1 – Flow of the Document Search and Selection Process: identification phase

	English	Spanish
<i>WoS-JCR</i>	287	0
<i>Scopus</i>	258	0
<i>Google Scholar</i>	16.400	2.990
<i>JSTOR</i>	2.557	46
<i>Forward snowballing</i>	137	4

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Table 2 – Flow of the Document Search and Selection Process: screening phase

	English	Spanish
<i>WoS-JCR</i>	20	0
<i>Scopus</i>	28	0
<i>Google Scholar</i>	x	x
<i>JSTOR</i>	43	10
<i>Forward snowballing</i>	19	3

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

**Table 3 – Flow of the Document Search and Selection Process:
inclusion phase**

	1970	1980	1990	Total
<i>WoS-JCR</i>	10	4	6	20
<i>Scopus</i>	6	7	15	28
<i>JSTOR</i>	23	16	14	53
Forward snowballing	16	4	2	22

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Finally, for the content analysis, the systematization and categorization of the collected data were carried out through a table structured around the following columns: Why innovate? (needs, problems, etc.); What is innovation for? (aims and purposes); What is innovation? (definitions and associated terms); In what areas should innovation occur? (objects of innovation); and Who is involved? (promoting agents and target actors).

The Rise of the Discourse of the Innovation Imperative in Education

The researcher Christian Ydesen (2019) notes that one of the speakers at the first conference on education organized by the OECD in 1961 stated that education was too important to be left exclusively in the hands of educators. Only seven years later, this international organization established the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), with the aim of analyzing and guiding the future of education systems through a lens of efficiency and resource optimization. The impact was such that, scarcely a decade after that first conference, the then Secretary-General of the OECD claimed that within just a few years they had succeeded in making the relationship between education and the economy unquestionable for any educational policymaker within public administration (Lennep, 1970).

As can be explicitly observed in the very name given to CERI, this relationship was articulated through educational research conducted from a highly specific perspective, but also through innovation, toward which the outcomes of such research were necessarily expected to point, as Cros (1993) noted in a comprehensive study on educational innovation at the beginning of the 1990s. This author, like others at the time and subsequently (Maldonado-Mariscal; Alijew, 2023), argues that this relationship was grounded in the thought of the economist Joseph Schumpeter, who was particularly influential during those years. Schumpeter maintained that the optimal development and evolution of the capitalist system depend on fostering a continuous dynamic of destruction and transcendence of the established order through innovations. These innovations would renew and temporarily stabilize the system, only to be disrupted again by further innovations, in an indefinite process of “creative destruction” (Schumpeter, 1934).

However, whereas until the 1970s the initiation of innovative processes was largely driven by inventions emerging from basic research

and technological advancement, it subsequently became evident that innovation would no longer be the result of newly generated knowledge, but rather of market demands and factors, as demonstrated by Kline and Rosenberg (1986). In other words, it would be the market that would primarily determine the lines of research and innovation shaping the development and evolution of all areas of society, rather than new knowledge produced by experts guided mainly by the scientific interests of their respective fields. In the field of education, this shift had both effects and costs. It increasingly became the case that “a host of programs were initiated at all levels with no specific function other than ‘to get something new going’” (Shedd; Clement, 1972, p. 15); that is, they were implemented without being primarily justified on genuinely pedagogical grounds. The displacement of pedagogical foundations by economic and technological criteria was reflected in the growing influence of human capital theory and modernization theory. As a consequence, changes within the education system were planned with the aim of equipping students according to labor market and technological needs.

It is worth noting UNESCO’s studies on global trends in educational innovation during the 1970s, which identified three major concerns. First, the need to adapt to social and technological changes driven by rapid advances in science, technology, and social organization. Second, the improvement of educational relevance and effectiveness, linked to each country’s social and economic development. Third, education’s contribution to social cohesion and national identity, particularly in contexts characterized by plural communities. It should be borne in mind that, during the preceding decades, marked by developmentalism, major reforms of education systems in many countries were closely associated with processes of modernization in nations considered underdeveloped or developing. In the 1960s and 1970s, a global spirit of change was widely recognized, leading to the assertion that innovation was, by definition, desirable (Huberman, 1973).

This global spirit also gave rise to another line of approach to educational innovation, stemming from the growing interest it began to attract in other disciplines within the Social Sciences beyond Economics, particularly from the 1960s onward, such as Sociology, Social Psychology, and Anthropology. As a result, innovation came to be understood as a complex phenomenon, characterized by multidisciplinary interest and perspectives that made it possible to examine its relationship with what were considered the contemporary concerns and challenges facing educational institutions. This led Cros (1997) to conceptualize innovation as a driver of change capable not only of regenerating institutions but also of exerting a broader impact on social and economic structures.

In any case, what is clear is that from its very beginnings different approaches to educational innovation coexisted. Alongside more economic perspectives, it is important to highlight more critical view-

points influenced by the civil rights movement of the 1960s, which ushered in a period of social and cultural transformation in many countries. These perspectives brought to the fore the demands of certain minorities, calls for greater civic participation in educational contexts, and the pursuit of equal opportunities for disadvantaged groups. Authors such as Basset (1973) linked innovation to dissatisfaction with certain traditional teaching methods, which were criticized for presenting curricular content perceived as irrelevant and for failing to take into account the social and cultural context of schools, as well as students' expectations. These perspectives focused on educational problems understood in relation to specific social realities, aiming to improve the quality of learning through innovative proposals in the areas of curriculum, teaching methods, school organization, and assessment. In this sense, they incorporated a narrative centered on addressing the challenges of a changing society, one that was developing new cultural needs and demanding social change, while also responding to global economic pressures and technological innovations.

In this regard, following the publication of the U.S. report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), new concerns emerged that eclipsed approaches oriented toward equality and contributed to the growing dominance of an economic perspective on innovation. The report warned of a perceived crisis in the American education system, arguing that students were failing to meet the academic standards required to compete in an increasingly globalized world. Concerns focused on the quality of education, students' inadequate preparation for the labor market, and the need to raise academic standards. As a result, greater emphasis was placed on accountability, the standardization of testing, and the implementation of structural reforms aimed at improving educational quality in terms of measurable performance.

Finally, it is worth noting that the 1970s witnessed a significant effort toward theorization and research on innovation, aimed at developing theoretical-practical models for educational change and articulating conceptual frameworks that are not found in the literature of subsequent decades. For this reason, the present study draws on a greater number of references from this decade than from later periods. Among the most significant and influential theories within international organizations, Havelock et al. (1973) highlight Everett Rogers' theory of the diffusion of innovations, focused on the dissemination of experiences within social systems; Lewin's theory of planned change, centered on organizational transformation and the importance of planning and member participation; and theories of educational innovation concerned with how innovations are generated, adopted, and disseminated in educational contexts, taking into account factors such as resistance to change, organizational culture, and the availability of resources. These attempts at theorization gradually lost prominence in subsequent debates, as the economic perspective on innovation came to prevail.

In sum, the contemporary discourse of educational innovation took shape historically from the mid-twentieth century onward, emerging out of debates concerning the role of education in the modernization of developing countries, economic growth, and national cohesion. The transformation of innovation into an unquestionable imperative was thus the result of a complex network of interests which, with the active involvement of international organizations, profoundly altered the way educational change has been conceived, prioritizing its instrumental function over its pedagogical meaning, in favor of economic and market rationalities.

The Discursive Construction of Innovation: Purposes, Conceptions, and Involved Actors

The following section offers an analysis of the theoretical issues involved in the construction of the discourse of educational innovation, seeking to unpack the underlying rationality that sustains its narratives.

Justifying Innovation: from technological to economic rationality

As noted in the previous section, the reasons for promoting educational innovation have oscillated among technical, social, and economic dimensions. The literature reveals an evolution beginning in the 1970s, when a predominantly technical approach prevailed, understood in terms of adaptability to technological change. This orientation entailed the need to transform education, which was expected to produce broader social effects. De la Orden (1972) argued that “the profound modifications that technology [was] inducing in all spheres of human life [required] the adoption of new techniques in every domain of activity” (p. 171), a process that, of course, was not meant to be at odds with improving teaching and learning processes. In other words, during this period efforts were made to establish a more efficient relationship between inputs (resources) and outputs (results) (Shedd; Clement, 1972). Education was thus required to adapt to a new context that would reshape its objectives and expected outcomes while, at the same time, rendering it more efficient, always, however, according to parameters and criteria of change and improvement established outside the strictly educational sphere. In this sense, no explicit pedagogical rationale appears to justify the need for change; rather, what emerges is the predominance of an instrumental rationality.

Indeed, already in the 1970s one can identify voices pointing to a clear marketing rationale grounded in “school self-image” and “reputation,” sustained by this adaptability imposed as an imperative. As Pincus (1974) argued, many schools often “tended voluntarily to adopt innovations which [promoted] the schools’ self-image by demonstrating that the schools [were]: up-to-date, efficient, professional, and responsive” (p. 122), yet without providing evidence that the innovations introduced actually led to improvements in students’ education. Many institutions “committed to innovation, merely try to run fast enough to

keep up with the best publicized of the educational fads, fashions, or genuine reforms that appear on the horizon.” (Cogan, 1976, p. 224).

It is also important to acknowledge the existence of studies on educational innovations conducted in the United States during this decade, such as Corwin’s (1975) research in 131 schools and Havelock et al.’s (1973) study based on 353 responses. Their findings revealed a diversity of motivations underlying the implementation of innovations. While these were partly driven by the need to adapt to technological changes, as previously noted, they also responded to factors such as the desire to address poverty and limited family resources, with a particular emphasis on improving the quality of education and the functioning of educational institutions. The motivations for innovation thus framed educational change as an inescapable necessity, invoking the image of a world characterized by constant and rapid transformation. They also pointed to an uncertain future and to educational structures perceived as rigid and insufficiently responsive. Within this interpretative framework, marked by transience and ephemerality, processes of adaptation to social, cultural, and technological transformations were presented as unavoidable.

Research in the 1980s, building on these developments, tended to take for granted the inherent desirability of innovation, referring to it as an assumed framework (Rice, 1982). Innovation was thus presented as a vehicle for adopting new educational and social paradigms grounded in reform processes intended to promote social transformation and change. These reforms aimed to improve educational quality, efficiency, and student performance, with the declared purpose of overcoming dogmatism, conservatism, and traditionalism (McGeown, 1980). Scholars pointed to deficiencies in an education system that was failing to meet prevailing societal expectations regarding quality (Altbach, 1986) and proposed raising educational standards and enhancing teaching and learning processes. The purposes of innovation increasingly took on the contours of a globally competitive orientation, focused on social and economic development, that is, on preparing students for a competitive labor market and rapid technological advancement. At the same time, there remained a stated concern with ensuring equitable access across socioeconomic and racial lines, even as the broader framework became progressively aligned with economic rationalities.

In Porter’s (1980) terms, several factors could be identified as hindering the effective implementation of innovations, among the most prominent being the gap between ideologues, project applicants, and those responsible for implementation. Conversely, the same author argued that factors likely to enhance implementation effectiveness included greater coherence among elements such as prior observation, piloting, participation in implementation, and analysis of results. It was during this decade that the idea became increasingly consolidated that education should have a positive impact on economic development. These dominant perspectives, however, were not without criti-

cism. As Bishop (1986) contended, social systems, including the educational system, should exist for individuals and their well-being, not the other way around. From this standpoint, the mere fact that a system adapts to a context that appears technically and socially new does not necessarily imply that it is superior to the system it replaces.

During the 1990s, increasing emphasis was placed on the need to transform education in response to *the new economic and social context* (Jacob, 1997), which was seen as necessarily requiring innovation. The processes that had begun in the 1980s thus intensified further during this decade. It was at the outset of this period that Hood (1991) coined the concept of New Public Management, which at the time represented a new administrative rationality that significantly affected education. This approach transformed public services into more commercialized and market-oriented products by incorporating private-sector management models into the public sector (Carter; O'Neill, 1995; Ball, 1998). This expansion found strong support in the recommendations of international organizations such as the OECD, UNESCO, the World Bank, the Global Partnership for Education, and others, which contributed to the construction of a global educational agenda disseminated worldwide. This agenda was closely linked to economic improvement through strengthening the relationship between schooling, employment, productivity, and trade. Among the principles it promoted were innovation tied to competition, quality, technological training, and evaluation, elevating innovation to a highly valued educational principle whose influence persists to this day. Although some critical voices can be identified (Eisner, 1990), they were clearly in the minority.

As a result, the shift toward an instrumental rationality that prioritizes adaptation to technological and economic change led innovation to move from being a means of addressing educational challenges, such as teaching strategies, the meaning of educational practice in new contexts, the reconstruction of educational aims, or curricular renewal, to becoming an end in itself. It came to be sustained and legitimized by criteria external to the pedagogical field, rather than by educational considerations intrinsic to it.

Defining Educational Innovation: conceptual ambiguity and associated terms

Between the 1970s and the 1990s, definitions of innovation and the terms associated with it underwent significant variation, largely because, from its introduction and popularization within the field of education, the concept of innovation, as Debeauvais (1974, p. 495) noted, "is sufficiently vague to enable everyone to project on to it his own system of preferences". Some definitions adopt a more structural orientation, pointing to political and organizational change; others are more contextual, focusing on local settings and emphasizing didactic and methodological transformation; still others make no such distinction. For this reason, educational innovation is often described "has not yet come into existence but which is necessary in order to overcome the

difficulties besetting the development of education; it is thus as protean as the concept of change itself” (Debeauvais, 1974).

However, despite this original ambiguity, which has persisted over the years up to the present day (Quilabert et al., 2023), from the outset certain distinctive features were identified by some authors that endowed the concept with a more specific character. First, from the early 1970s onward, researchers began to draw a distinction between invention and innovation. As Hearn (1972, p. 358) explained, “the innovator, who is more likely to be a practitioner than a researcher, is involved in the process of installing an invention and in doing so makes substantial adaptations and modifications”. In other words, although every innovation is preceded by an invention, and at least during this period such invention generally implied the existence of research supporting its suitability, innovation itself referred primarily to the process of putting it into practice. The innovation professional, unlike the inventor or creator, is not focused on theory but on practice; they do not investigate or provide foundations but rather execute. It is this role of executor that would gradually be delegated to educators. In this way, the theoretical basis and justification for change would no longer fall under their responsibility but could instead be determined by contexts external to the educational sphere, whether the labor market, the state of the economy, or prevailing social conditions. As Laudicina and Laudicina (1977) observed, “education must now and in the future focus primarily on the adaptive process” (p. 25). This adaptive purpose not only guided specific innovations but also redefined what counted as educational and how problems within the education system were conceptualized, for example, the perceived mismatch between schooling and labor market needs, the demand for lifelong learning, the requirement for adaptability, or students’ demotivation in the face of the information revolution (UNESCO, 1970).

Second, given the economic origin of the term innovation, the 1970s also witnessed the emergence of a clear distinction between innovation and the concepts of “renovación” in Spanish or “reform” in English, which were initially similar and had been more commonly used in the educational field up to that point. In the Spanish context, some authors explicitly insisted on continuing to use the term “renovación” even to refer to changes that could be considered innovations, describing them instead as “renovaciones metodológicas” (methodological renovations). This preference stemmed from the fact that educational innovation “emphasizes novelty. Its acceptance implies the introduction of something new simply because it is new. In contrast, ‘renovación’ presents itself as a ‘conservative’ term” (Rodríguez Diéguez, 1976, p. 171); that is, a term focused not only on novelty but also on preserving those aspects of the system deemed worthy of continuity. The concept of innovation, derived from the economic field and particularly from the line of thought popularized through Schumpeter’s (1934) work, carried a connotation of rupture, of necessary disruption and the overcoming of what is established, which the term “renovación” did not convey. Possibly for this reason, the latter gradually lost

ground over time, to the point that scarcely a decade later it is difficult to find references to “*renovación metodológica*”. Educational innovation was not to look backward but exclusively forward, and in a radical manner. Educational systems were thus “seen to be ill-adapted both as regards the effectiveness of instruction and as regards economic requirements and the social objectives of the process of democratization.” (Debeauvais, 1974, p. 494). Nothing within the educational system seemed salvageable; consequently, rather than reforming or renewing, one had to innovate. In response to such positions, critical voices emerged questioning the imprudent abandonment of traditional educational structures, which fulfilled essential functions such as providing social stability and a basic level of academic competence that should not be lightly discarded (Drumheller, 1973). These authors advocated for a cautious and well-supported transition toward innovative practices that would preserve the valuable elements of the existing system. Nevertheless, the principles of novelty and disruption were maintained and even reinforced in subsequent decades.

By the late 1970s, some authors acknowledged that, beyond the changes and effects educational innovations might produce in classrooms, they themselves constituted a form of policy change (Kozuch, 1979), which did not necessarily follow a single or coherent direction. In this regard, the distinction proposed by McGeown (1979; 1980) is particularly noteworthy. He differentiated between innovation as product—specific novelties constructed phenomenologically from subjects’ perceptions, experiences, attitudes, values, and their interactions with others and reference groups—and innovation as process, understood as the ongoing capacity of educational institutions to adapt to changing contextual circumstances. Over time, it was this latter conception, innovation as a continuous process of adaptation, that gained greater prominence.

In his study of educational change, Fullan (1982) argues that educational change and innovation are related concepts, yet not synonymous. For this author, educational change is fundamentally a social phenomenon, referring to a broader process encompassing any modification in practices, policies, structures, and cultures within the education system. By contrast, educational innovation denotes the introduction of new ideas, methods, technologies, or approaches within the educational sphere. It thus constitutes a component of educational change—indeed, a catalyst within the change process—but one specifically centered on novelty and on the implementation of practices that had not previously been in use.

In the 1990s, those who most clearly captured the perspective of what innovation means were the researchers and documentalists at the National Institute for Pedagogical Research (Institut National de Recherche Pédagogique, INRP), who developed a database (NOVA) of written works on innovation in the field of education and training. Based on these data, and following an effort at conciliatory synthesis, Botrel (1996) argues that “innovation is the collective creation of origi-

inal solutions to specific (new) needs” (p. 204). According to the author, it is also necessary to distinguish between imposed innovations and those initiated and fostered from the grassroots, which cannot be decreed, following the same distinction between product and process mentioned above.

The materialities of innovation: what to innovate in

The educational landscape encompasses multiple dimensions and settings; therefore, the question of which specific aspects of education should be innovated is a pertinent one. As noted in previous sections, Bruner (1975) argues that “education will not and cannot emerge from the efforts of the educational researcher acting solely within the constraints of classically defined educational objectives” (p. 184), since the very structure of society is undergoing radical transformation, driven in part by technological and scientific advances that alter its functioning. Accordingly, educational innovation should focus, first and foremost, on modifying the structure and organization of a system that must adapt to the demands of a socio-economic context that expects more from it than in the past. This, of course, implied that “the personnel involved must be specially trained” (Cogan, 1976, p. 184) and that “policies could be designed to enhance receptivity to change” (Berman; McLaughlin, 1976, p. 365). Everything had changed, and it became important to prevent resistance to what was increasingly assumed to be inevitable. Thus, although in the 1970s some authors emphasized the importance of introducing practical modifications in the classroom by teachers, the primary focus was rather on transforming the underlying foundations. The issue was, fundamentally, to change the very structure of the system, its aims and objectives, which were no longer to be understood as strictly educational in nature.

As early as the beginning of the 1980s, Porter (1980) emphasized, along these lines, several perspectives that coexisted at that time: (1) a comparative political perspective on educational innovations (United States and Australia); (2) an organizational perspective on educational innovations; and (3) an interactionist perspective on educational innovations. Regarding the second perspective, this author argues that there are certain factors that affect the implementation of innovation, such as its specific contextual conditions, implementation strategies, organizational environments, and the characteristics of the staff involved. Common (1983) identified the following measures as conducive to the use of innovation: (1) teachers should receive clear and precise definitions of the innovation and the implementation plan; (2) effective administrative control over the use of the innovation should be ensured; and (3) external pressures should be exerted on teachers to encourage the use of the innovation.

Finally, by the early 1990s, research began to focus more specifically on the methodology of teaching–learning processes, as reflected in Ohlhausen et al. (1992), who state that “educational innovations come and go, but few manage to gain the strong grassroots support that is necessary to transform the way teachers teach and students learn.”

(p. 536). Gradually, the focus, which had previously been shared between new media and changes in ways of conceiving and organizing education, shifted almost exclusively toward the use of new media. In this regard, a critical questioning emerged both concerning the very prominence of methodological innovation and the lack of its evaluation (Woodward, 1993), and regarding the issue of who should decide what to innovate (Jacob, 1997). This latter concern connects directly with the agents of innovation, which we address in the following section.

Thus, the discourse on educational innovation has not only been ambiguous in its definition, but also in the domains to which it has been applied. The shift toward a technocratic vision of change, aligned with economic and instrumental rationality, has prioritized issues and practices focused on means and on how to teach, such as assessment or digitalization, as well as administrative logics over educational ones. What is measurable, transferable, or efficient, to cite a few examples, has taken precedence over the meaning of education itself and over the pedagogical questions concerning why and for what purpose change should occur.

The Agents of Educational Innovation: who should initiate innovation?

With regard to the main agents of innovation, in the 1970s the focus was placed primarily on administrations and school leadership teams, as schools were operating within established dynamics that no longer seemed adequate to meet the demands of a new context, and change appeared to require, above all, leadership (Smith; Keith, 1971). During this decade, “it is generally acknowledged that administrators are crucial in introducing innovations at the local level, [...] principals are ordinarily responsible for the logistical problems associated with the diffusion of innovations. Yet [...], the classroom teacher is capable of exerting considerable control over the destiny of an innovation” (Helsel, 1972, p. 67).

This implied that administrations were expected to introduce innovations through regulations and policies, while leadership teams were tasked with disseminating them and overcoming potential obstacles within their schools, all under the assumption that, ultimately, teachers would play a decisive role in determining whether these measures succeeded or failed. For this reason, several studies proposed strategies aimed at encouraging teachers to become involved in the implementation of innovation (Mahan, 1970; O’Reilly; Fish, 1976; House, 1976). The goal was to persuade them; yet innovation was largely conceived as a top-down process. Teachers were primarily regarded as implementers rather than creators of innovation and thus needed to be incentivized both professionally and financially (Sociedad Española de Pedagogía, 1980). It is true that during this decade some critical texts challenged this view, offering advice to teachers on how to reverse the process and initiate innovations themselves. However, these perspectives were more marginal and explicitly recognized that such bottom-

up approaches were not the norm at the time, hence their call for change (Hill, 1971). Overall, it can be said that in the 1970s the focus of educational innovation was located primarily in positions of authority.

At the beginning of the 1980s, a warning began to emerge directed at teachers who neglected their role as agents of change. As Common (1983) noted, when teachers “do put a centrally initiated curriculum reform into practice, they are forfeiting some of their consent power by agreeing to change, say, their values, procedures, materials, and so on” (p. 207). For this reason, several studies emphasized “the importance of teacher participation in educational innovation” (Vandenberghe, 1986, p. 17). However, such participation was not always easy to achieve. Works such as those by Champness and Young (1980) highlighted teachers’ resistance to implementing innovations. The capacity of this professional group to innovate was understood as a multidimensional construct (McGeown, 1980), encompassing attitudes and values in relation to the implementation of specific innovations. This issue is particularly significant in light of the evidence that one of the central elements determining the success of an innovation is the teaching staff (Hurst, 1981), in conjunction with contextual factors (Papagiannis et al., 1982; Theodossin, 1983).

In the 1990s, research on educational innovation increasingly shifted its focus toward teachers as the primary agents of change. This perspective was not always adopted uncritically, indeed, it was also subject to questioning (Eisner, 1990), but it came to be regarded as reflecting the reality of what occurs in practice. It was argued that no innovation can truly become such unless teachers themselves act as its driving force, regardless of the good intentions behind reforms: “While top-down approaches may demonstrate a system's commitment to change, they fail to recognize the complexity of the change process for individual teachers.” (Ohlhausen et al., 1992, p. 536). From that point onward, teachers would increasingly occupy the center of the innovation process, a position they continue to hold to this day.

It becomes clear that one of the central elements of educational innovation lies in identifying the agents responsible for change. Teachers have moved from being regarded largely as resistant to innovation to becoming its primary implementers, reshaping their professional identity in the process. At the same time, the gradual decline of reform as a top-down instrument of change contributed to strengthening the leading role attributed to teachers. However, this prominence, far from representing a genuine democratization of change from below, appears instead to function as a strategy aimed at increasing the effectiveness of innovation processes. This is suggested by the fact that, beyond the formal possibility of launching innovation projects, little effort has been made to foster teachers’ collective organization, enhance their influence in decision-making processes, or protect their professional autonomy. Moreover, teaching practice has increasingly been subjected to market-oriented logics, accountability frameworks, and performance-driven evaluation systems.

Conclusion: the need to reclaim pedagogical reason and education

This text has sought to problematize the meaning, uses, and effects of the hegemonic discourse of educational innovation at a time when it appears unquestionable. To this end, a detailed analysis was conducted, following a scoping review methodology, tracing the evolution of this discourse from its introduction into the educational field in the mid-twentieth century to its consolidation toward the end of the century. As we have observed, educational innovation shifted from being associated with modernization and economic development in the 1960s—under the influence of international organizations and human capital theory—to becoming, in the 1970s, a field of debate between technocratic perspectives and critical currents focused on social justice and citizenship. In the 1980s, by contrast, technical rationality and quality management regained prominence, and by the 1990s innovation had consolidated itself as a global and hegemonic discourse, institutionally embraced as an imperative of educational change up to the present day.

Cros (2009) argues that “innovation is the child of the competitive economy” (p. 125), a claim that, in light of the genealogy outlined above, is not difficult to observe in the educational field, where the economic perspective on the concept has progressively become dominant. This dominance has not been without resistance, however, nor without the emergence of theoretical and practical perspectives partly removed from this model, which render educational innovation a highly complex object of analysis (Cros, 1993). Drawing on case studies of school innovations over three decades, Hargreaves and Goodson (2006) point out that the 1980s constituted a period of complexity and contradiction, marked by growing awareness of the need for deeper reforms. For these authors, educational change and innovation were shaped by the convergence of large-scale economic and demographic developments that generated powerful forces for transformation—internal and international migration, recognition of linguistic diversity, and demands for equity regardless of socioeconomic, racial, or ethnic background, among others. Their analysis of the 1980s highlights the decade primarily as a transitional stage in education, characterized by tension between innovation and standardization. Educational reforms, together with increasing student diversity and generational shifts among teachers, created a context in which teaching became more student-centered, yet also more regulated and controlled. This heightened regulation sought to counter the strong criticisms of the 1970s regarding innovation as a passing trend; however, such control also aligned education more closely with economic parameters of efficiency and accountability, thereby relegating social dimensions that, as noted earlier, had been foregrounded in some of the texts of that same decade.

Cros (2009) noted that the 1990s were characterized by a growing tendency to regard innovation as a professional achievement. This ob-

servation aligns with our analysis. While in earlier periods there had already been calls for teacher participation and recognition of their role in the success or failure of innovation implementation, such participation often took the form of strategies aimed at persuading teachers and overcoming their resistance, rather than presenting innovation as a defining element of professional excellence. From the 1990s onward, innovation began to shape the very notion of optimal professional development in education. Teachers were no longer seen merely as implementers of externally designed reforms but increasingly as agents of innovation themselves, a conception that remains prevalent today. It is precisely this shift in the understanding of the teaching profession that largely explains the success of innovation as an imperative. If education is no longer conceived as possible without innovation, resistance is not only reduced but may even appear illegitimate or obsolete.

The consolidation of innovation as a hegemonic imperative has been accompanied by sustained efforts from international organizations to frame educational reality within a specific economic model. Although, as we have shown, this framing was already implicit from the 1960s onward and became increasingly explicit by the late 1990s, it is in the mid-2010s that it appears in an unmistakable form (OECD, 2016). The growing identification of education with social and economic development has entailed the translation of core elements of educational practice and pedagogical thought into categories associated with economic, instrumental, and techno-functional rationality. This shift has permeated the educational community through ongoing processes of persuasion, grounded in discourses centered almost exclusively on contextual adaptability, whereas education ought to be guided by criteria intrinsic to its own purposes and norms (Biesta, 2024). As Cros (1993, p. 213) argued nearly three decades ago,

education is too important and too serious a field to be left solely in the hands of innovation. It rests upon existential questions which, far from belonging exclusively to the modernity of our Western societies, assert themselves across all epochs and throughout the entire human condition.

Thirty years later, little appears to have changed in this regard, as both the dominant discourse and its minority critiques tend to move in much the same direction (Massó, 2021). There is thus little doubt about the success of innovation as an imperative within the educational field. Nevertheless, it remains possible, and indeed necessary, to uphold the right to think about education from its own foundations and guiding principles².

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Notes

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