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Berta Wernicke and her teacher training project for primary education in Argentina at the beginning of the 20th century

Carolina Cuesta

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8395-9965>

Abstract: This article aims to provide a first approach to the professional biography of Berta Wernicke (1871-1962). Since there is no study in Argentina that has addressed her multifaceted work, there is also no comprehensive work on her life in terms of precise data. Thus, our research questions are about the reasons why a biography of Berta Wernicke has not been written and why she is not recognized in Argentine educational history studies that address the period of the constitution of the national intellectual and pedagogical field. Specifically, regarding their participation in the discussions that took place with greater intensity at the beginning of the 20th century. This means that this is a later period and one of debates, especially teaching of disciplines, that were postulated as a break from the ideals of the Normal School established with the creation of the Argentine public education system. The conceptual foundations and concern for developing methods were framed within the political processes, not without tensions and ideological differences, carried out by the liberal reformist movements, including feminist ones, to which Berta Wernicke belonged. In relation to the above, we focus on her 1916 publication entitled Special Methodology of Primary Education as the author's search for renewed teacher training through the articulation of different scientific perspectives for the development of didactics based on ethnographic knowledge of children's learning.

Keywords: Berta Wernicke; educationist; biography.

1 Who was Berta Wernicke as an educator during her time?

It is curious that a woman such as Berta Wernicke, who dedicated her career to scientific production in Pedagogy and Didactics in the XIX and XX centuries in Argentina, does not have a place in national education history studies. Perhaps it reflects the very absence we are attempting to begin to address. We are referring to a woman who took part in the definition of the guidelines that education in the country should follow, alongside not only prominent men such as Víctor Mercante (1919), Pablo Pizzurno, José Ingenieros, Enrique Romero Brest, among others; but also women: Rosario Vera Peñaloza, Elina González Acha de Correa Morales, Cecilia Grierson, Alicia Moreau de Justo, Elvira Rawson de Dellepiane (among the most renowned in different sources).



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Lucía Lionetti (2006, p. 100) adds Raquel Camaña, Matilde Filgueira de Díaz, Alfonsina Storni and Herminia Brumana. She does so because it was a prominent group of:

High-ranking educators who studied in Normal Schools and were members of a liberal reformer movement in which they took part by restructuring social policies boosted by the most progressive sector of the government to impose a civilizing policy to guarantee the stability of the Nation. Therefore, some groups of graduates from Normal Schools achieved 'honor and prestige' by becoming key figures in the educational movement of that era. They accompanied these educational policies and, by doing so, they worked within the administration as teachers, inspectors, and authors of educational treaties (Lionetti, 2006, p. 99-100).

Berta Wernicke (1916) is the author of one of those “educational treaties” from the first decade of the 20th century, called *Apuntes para un Curso de Metodología Especial de la Educación Primaria. Primera Parte. Lecciones de cosas-Geografía-Historia natural*, in English *Notes on a Special Methodology Course for Primary Education. Part One. Lessons on Geography and Natural History* (from now on, *Methodology Course*). We¹ come across the existence of Berta Wernicke through the constant mentioning of her surname (not her first name) by Victor Mercante (1919), particularly in his work called *How to Learn to Read* from 1919.

Figure 1 – Picture of Berta Wernicke (1871-1962)



Source: Meeting minutes Argentine Society of Geographical Studies (GAEA).
Available at: <https://www.gaea.org.ar/insti2.htm>

¹ We carried out research at *Universidad Pedagógica Nacional* (Argentina) in the Beginning Literacy Area, Humanities and Arts Department. This research was conducted from an ethnographic perspective, which involved documenting Argentine contributions to teaching as a central element of our approach to understanding teaching practices.

The discovery of the Wernicke surname led us to the familiar history of transatlantic immigrants in Argentina by the end of the century, a period characterized by teaching and the professional formation possibilities given by the educational system during the process of the constitution and consolidation of the country. The Wernicke were a family of immigrants who established themselves in the Swedish and German colonies in Buenos Aires province (García Folgado; Toscano; García, 2022). They were part of the large newly arrived social groups from other lands. The liberal reformist project aimed to integrate these groups as productive citizens of the Nation, which was looking for an identity of its own (Zusman, 2001; Lionetti, 2006; Dussel, 2014). We will develop this family history and the life of Berta Wernicke in the following section.

Nonetheless, before we move forward, two specific clarifications will help explain the historical context in which Berta Wernicke developed her professional career. The educator was born in 1871 in Bragado City, in Buenos Aires province. She was educated as a teacher with other women in an Argentine Normal School after “[...] by request of the Minister, and later on President of the Nation, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento [...]” other groups of women participated “in a pedagogical bonding experience of great relevance for the history of education: the call for North American teachers to lead Normal Schools in different parts of the territory” (Lamelas, 2024, p. 43). We know that Berta Wernicke graduated from Normal School N° 1 of Teachers in Buenos Aires City, founded in 1874, which was the ‘mother school’ of the “[...] nine Normal Schools for women, created between 1895 and 1914 [...]” (Rodríguez, 2021, p. 3) in the same city. At the beginning of the 20th century, “[...] this school had trained a female professional elite”, as its graduated women “were designated by the Executive Power to be headmistresses in other Normal Schools in Buenos Aires City and all the provinces” (Rodríguez, 2021, p. 4). As we will discuss later, although we have not yet determined the exact date of the graduation of Berta Wernicke, this fact is not insignificant when considering the conceptual and ideological political debates within the liberal reformist movements at the turn of the century. These debates significantly impacted on the discussions regarding the necessity of effectively modernizing teacher training in Normal Schools. As certain groups of Argentine Normal School movement insisted on the sanctioning of the Law 1420 of Common Education, free, secular, and compulsory, issued in 1884, “[...] it was possible to achieve the motto

of the 80s generation in Argentina: 'to govern is to educate' [...]", while others highlighted "[...] the poor results achieved by this model of public school." (Lionetti, 2006, p. 94). With this:

The controversy reached a turning point when the plan for educational reform in primary, National, and Normal Schools, was promoted by the minister of Cult, Justice, and Public Instruction, Carlos Saavedra Lamas. He presented a proposal to the Legislative Power in 1915 with a profuse and convincing pedagogical argumentation. It justified the urgency to change the course of public education at the primary and middle levels. The reform was carried out for a year and was repealed during Hipólito Yrigoyen's presidency (Lionetti, 2006, p. 94).

Berta Wernicke published her Methodology Course in 1916 and wrote it during this national educational debate. As we will develop later, she actively supported Saavedra Lamas' reform. Berta Wernicke participated as an intellectual and feminist pedagogue in various groups, and she associated with people disappointed by the first stage of the liberal project. They organized different institutions and carried out congresses, events, and journals, among other actions, to rethink the project. We believe that it is clear, and as we will develop in this work, that Berta Wernicke's thoughts aligned with a specific core of ideas, fostered by her friendship with Elina González Acha (1861-1942), "[...] one of the first graduates of the Normal School of Teachers, along with Cecilia Grierson and Berta Wernicke, an institution in which the naturalist (and Atheist) Eduardo L. Holmberg had been educated. This awakened in her a special interest in science." (Malosetti Costa, 2024, p. 97). This set of ideas circulating in "the Buenos Aires Athenaeum (1892-1902) [...] discussed the relationship between humanity and nature both in aesthetic and scientific terms, economic and political" (Malosetti Costa, 2024, p. 91), and also, as we will see later on in this work, in terms of the foundational ideals of the Argentine Society of Geographical Studies (GAEA) in which Berta Wernicke had a key role. At the time, historically speaking, there was a sphere of Argentine citizens belonging to the 80s generation who were disappointed as a result of the economic crisis that started in 1890 and led to "a civil-military revolt called Revolución del Parque (in English, Park Revolution) whose result was the overthrow of the president Miguel Juárez Celman in the hands of an alliance between the recently founded Civic Union and a faction of the military forces" (Malosetti Costa, 2024, p. 91).

As we moved forward with our investigation of who Wernicke was, we thought at first that the sources were referring to a male scientist. We found a professional

biography of her son, Roberto, but at the same time, there were many references to Berta. We found these references in educational journals of the time, with the main scene occupied by *El Monitor de la Educación Común*² (1881-1949); (1959-1961); (1965-1976); (2000-2001) y 2004 (EL MONITOR [...], 1881-1949). This journal played a key role in delineating educational policies in Argentina, mainly during the first two periods. That is why *El Monitor* (1881-1949) has significant records, resolutions, and provisions about normative, teachers' designations and lesson plans. But also, it was a valuable distribution tool for the educational ideas of the time, with its divergencies, and with different articles from notables of the time. To submerge in each of the journal issues of *El Monitor* is to open to the possibility of new findings that have not yet been addressed, and which we cannot account for in this work.

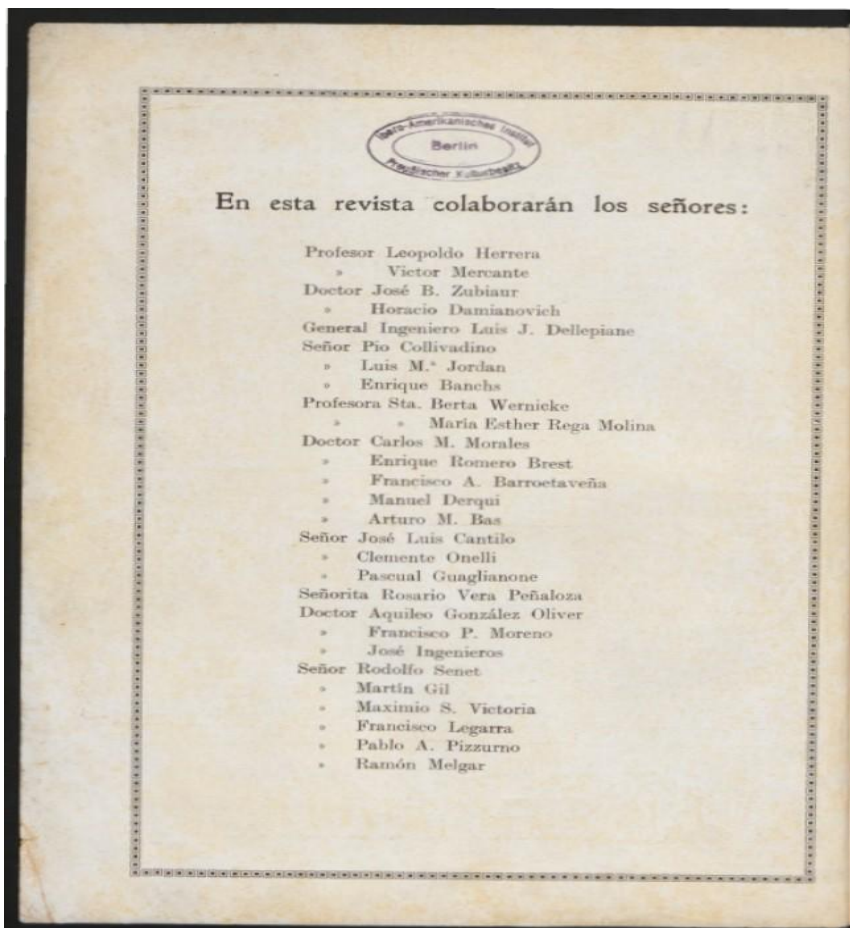
With the references of Berta Wernicke that we have found in *El Monitor*, we know that she was vice chancellor and later rector at National Lyceum N° 1 School for Primary teachers, in the former Capital City, today Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, between 1912 and 1922. She also worked with the Physical Education teacher to write one of the first books in the field, *Juegos escolares para las escuelas de niñas* (in English, *School Games for Girls' Schools*), published in 1904 by the prestigious publishing house Ángel Estrada. Therefore, given the participation of Berta Wernicke “Among those who compromised one way or another in the universe of the corporal practices [...]” and took part in “[...] the incorporation of women teaching Physical Education in schools” (Scharagrodsky, 2009, p. 4) this facet is the one that prevails on the few sources that mention her.

However, Berta Wernicke's main training was that of a Normal School teacher who later studied Geography and Natural Studies, Pedagogy, and Didactics. Her activity in the educational feminist movements was transdisciplinary because she believed in a political pedagogy that would construct didactics articulated with integrated science (more specifically, intuitive teaching). As we continued reading *El Monitor*, provided by different institutional digital sites, we came across another educational journal from the early 20th century: Volume 1 of the journal called *Mundo estudiantil*, in English *Students World* (1915). This journal was a school newspaper at the time (Finocchio, 2013) and included a variety of texts, stories, poetry, essays,

² In English, *The Preceptor of Education in Common*.

lectures, school activities, games, and comics, among others. Berta Wernicke participated in this journal with other prominent figures of the national political-philosophical educational ideals, such as José Ingenieros, Enrique Romero Brest, Pablo Pizzurno, Rosario Vera Peñaloza, and others already mentioned.

Figure 2 – Front page of the journal *Mundo estudiantil* (1915)



Source: Digital collections of Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut (Berlin).
Available at: <https://digital.iai.spk-berlin.de/viewer/image/790710498/2/#topDocAnchor>

The editorial note of *Mundo estudiantil* (1915) presents a shared programmatic perspective regarding the reasons why the comprehensive education of the child constitutes the appropriate pedagogical and didactic framework for Argentine schools, about the formation of the future citizenry required by the country's envisioned position.

It [the journal] is not guided by any sectarian spirit, nor by any petty interests. Its ideal is only that of our school (...) Its program, and didactics, will also be those of our Argentine school. In the same spirit, employing procedures that will harmonize interest, effort, and pleasure, we aim to promote a comprehensive education in our students, by developing their physical personality and a thoughtful love for nature, nurturing their scientific and historical curiosity, by educating their imaginative capacity, their expressive means and aesthetic feelings, by strengthening their character, and by

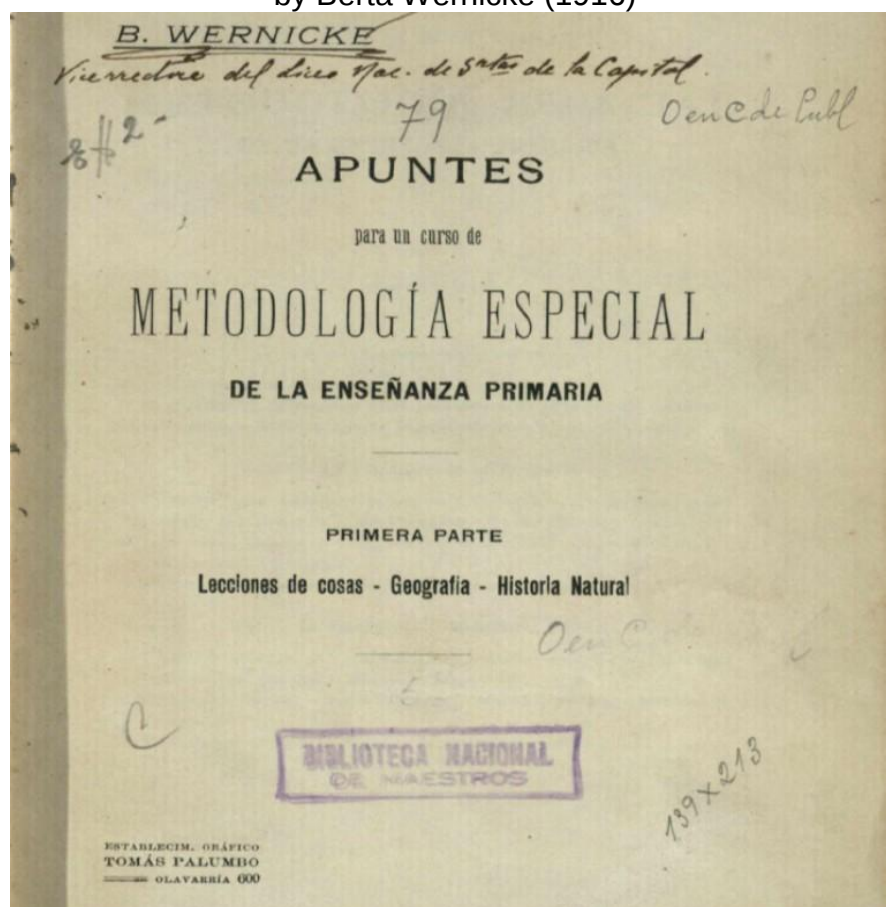
fostering the practice of generous actions and the love for a healthy, joyful, and fulfilling life. (By [...], 1915, p. 9).

The same journal, in pages 16 and 17, presents an essay signed by Berta Wernicke titled *La biología al alcance de todas las inteligencias. Simbiosis y mutualismos* (in English, *Biology within Reach of All Intelligence. Symbiosis and Mutualism*), in which she explains how observing nature teaches humans to solve social conflicts. We will return to this topic later. It is important to highlight now that this finding, connected to other primary sources, allowed us to distinguish the references to the surname Wernicke across the various documents of the time that we have consulted so far. We needed to compare what we believed were the author's unstudied contributions to the development of didactics' theoretical knowledge. Because, although by the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th feminist movements in Argentina science were starting to gain more salient ground, it was not easy yet to publish documents on scientific fields for women who were not already recognized as authorities.

This is how we could distinguish Berta Wernicke from her brother Roberto (Jr.) in the Methodology Course (1916), given that the authorial signature appears as "B. Wernicke." Although the handwritten note below the signature reads "Vice Chancellor of the National Lyceum for Girls of the Capital," we wanted to confirm that it was indeed the same person. Tracking her life and work, at the beginning, was a very complex task, full of gaps that we still cannot fill. For example, her childhood. Hence, the clarification that what we are communicating in this paper is merely a first approach.

The information we have about Berta Wernicke - birth details, family, or professional data – are fragments obtained from different sources. In some cases, as we have presented, sources refer to her production in physical education didactics for girls, but do not mention other disciplinary fields or her participation in intellectual feminist movements. However, Berta Wernicke is considered the promoter of female athletics in Argentina. By being principal of National Lyceum for Girls N°1, she supported the creation of the Alfa Women's Athletic Club in 1922, founded by young graduates. It functioned until the end of the decade (Anderson, 2022).

Figure 3 – Front page of *Apuntes para un Curso de Metodología Especial de la Educación Primaria. Primera Parte. Lecciones de cosas-Geografía-Historia natural* by Berta Wernicke (1916)



Source: Digital archive of the National Teachers' Library (no bibliographic data).
Available at: <http://www.bnm.me.gov.ar/giga1/libros/Wernicke-metodologia-1916.pdf>

It is possible that the lack of attention to Berta Wernicke's pedagogical and didactic ideas, and consequently to her insufficiently studied figure even by feminist studies (Anderson, 2022), is linked to the hegemonic interpretations that have shaped the history of Argentine education during the "Generation of the 80s", considered to be dominated by reformist liberal ideologies of a positivist nature. Lionetti (2006) claims that to subsume all this intellectual production into "[...] an expression of positivism as a dominant ideology of that time"; and to say, consequently, that "the absolute ideal of knowledge through natural science and its method would have determined the birth of Pedagogy as an extension of the natural sciences applied to human studies" (Lionetti, 2006, p. 98), overshadowed the fact that "[...] based on certain evidence, it can be considered that the conformation of the public educational system resorted to an

eclectic philosophy and contributions with a wide liberal ideological framework” (Lionetti, 2006, p. 98).

Hence, it may be that Berta Wernicke was forgotten because of these historiographic interpretations which, in many cases, left behind the study of women who took a stance on pedagogical and didactic production at the beginning of the 20th century. It requires the analysis “[...] of available languages at her time, and to chronicle the psychological concepts, as well as the writing and enunciating forms she employed” (Dussel, 2014, p. 4). For her pedagogical and didactics proposals, Berta Wernicke built on studies on human development conducted at that time in physiological psychology. She aimed to find the basis to comprehend and explain how children learn. Through her professional experience in teacher training, she developed her scientific foundations for primary school teaching didactics, in connection with her naturalistic and ethnographic scientific education. Furthermore, she built on the didactic ideals of prominent local and foreign authors. She participated in the pedagogical field and in teacher training to understand the needs of girls and young women in education and, thus, expand their chances to participate in society. In addition, she was part of the founding of one of the first scientific disciplinary societies in Argentina, Argentine Society of Geographical Studies (GAEA), in 1922.

There is much more to Berta Wernicke’s trajectory, who was also a writer of children’s and young adult literature and a popular science essayist, than the presumed acceptance and uncritical reproduction of hygienist positivism carried out by male scientists and applied to the physiological nature of the female body. Berta Wernicke participated in an intellectual movement of women who drew on their own scientific and artistic education to find the political arguments to foster the possibility for women to have a life beyond the domestic sphere (Anderson, 2022). Considering this, the studies of historiographical review become particularly relevant to revisit the period spanning between the 19th and 20th centuries, especially the beginning of the 20th, not solely through explanations that, as previously noted, have been internalized and reproduced as absolute truths. For example, the idea that the pedagogical scientific field shaped by the Argentine Normal School uniformly embodied “[...] the objectives of discipline and social control that the national government had attributed to the socialization of the subjects within this educational institution, responsible for training primary school teachers” (Zusman, 2001, p. 3).

On the contrary, recent research has deepened into the discussions between different actors involved in scientific and pedagogical fields highlighting the need to revise the historiography of education, mainly the extent and form of women's participation (Rossi, 2023), as well as the stereotyped representations of their subsidiary positions in the labor market which they supposedly accepted to occupy by taking advantage of the feminization of teaching in Argentina between the 19th and 20th centuries. In fact, the so-called advantage is reconsidered considering the view that women "found historical opportunities in the educational project of the time" (Figuerola Suárez, 2019, p. 95). As a result, they were able to organize spaces for collective struggle to reclaim the social status of teaching and improving working conditions within the rapidly expanding public education system, spurred by the implementation of compulsory and secular education, as well as advocating for access to secondary and higher education.

Thus, Berta Wernicke, as many other women of transatlantic immigrant families did, dedicated not just to "[...] domestic tasks and a variety of unskilled labor such as sewing, laundering, or cooking. [...]" Teaching became a forerunner of "[...] feminism in Argentina, [...] building different institutions (National Council of Women, Socialist Feminist Center or Center for Argentine University Women)" (Figuerola Suárez, 2019, p. 95) which, although they had different liberal or socialist ideals, "they agree on questioning the subordinate role of women both in the domestic sphere and the public and legal world" (Figuerola Suárez, 2019, p. 95). In fact, there is no mention of Berta Wernicke having had a family of her own or any offspring. All the references are about her autonomous, literary professional activity, and her many journeys to different countries.

2 Following Berta Wernicke's footsteps

Largely, Berta Luisa Wernicke's (her full name) biographical data was collected and corroborated with various primary sources and research papers about her father Robert Heinrich August Wernicke (1826-1881); her half-siblings Roberto Enrique Martín Wernicke Beltz (1852-1922, previously mentioned) and Julia Federica Herminia Wernicke Beltz (1860-1932). Robert arrived in Argentina married to Ida Augusta Beltz von Hagen, Roberto's (son) and Julia's mother. However, Berta was one of Robert's children from a second marriage to Federica Boltze, as well as their son Otto Guillermo

Luis Wernicke (1868-1942), married to Rosario Frers (1871-1926) with whom Berta traveled to the USA and Brazil, according to migration registers of the time and to one of her two brief biographies, which we will discuss later. We cannot develop this here but, up to this point, we have not provided any precise data about Berta Wernicke's childhood. What we do have is, as previously mentioned, information about her father. He was a German immigrant teacher who came to Baradero City, in Buenos Aires province, where Berta and all her siblings were born. He became a teacher of young students from the Argentine elite in the former Capital City. Robert settled in a Sweden-German Colony and developed a Spanish grammar teaching method, published in a book (García Folgado; Toscano García, 2022).

Figure 4 – Berta Wernicke's immigration file for her trip to Brazil in 1940

REPÚBLICA DOS ESTADOS UNIDOS DO BRASIL
FICHA CONSULAR DE QUALIFICAÇÃO
MODÉLO S.C. 159

Esta ficha, expedida em duas vias, será entregue à Polícia Marítima e à Imigração no porto de destino

Nome por extenso Berta Luisa Wernicke
Admitido em território nacional em caráter Temporário
(temporário ou permanente)
Nos termos do art. 25 letra a do dec. n. 5.010-20-8 de 1938
Lugar e data de nascimento Baradero, Bs.As. 19 / 1 / 1871
Nacionalidade argentina Estado civil solteira
Filiação (nome do Pai e da Mãe) Robert Wernicke e Federica Boltze
Profissão educacionista
Residência no país de origem Viamonte 740, nesta
NOME IDADE SEXO

FILHOS MENORES DE 18 ANOS

Cart-Ident. Passaporte n. 340292 expedido pelas autoridades de Polícia desta Capital na data 5-5-1940 visado sob n. 2111

ASSINATURA DO PORTADOR: Berta Wernicke

NOTA - Esta ficha deve ser preenchida à mão pela autoridade consular sendo as duas vias em original

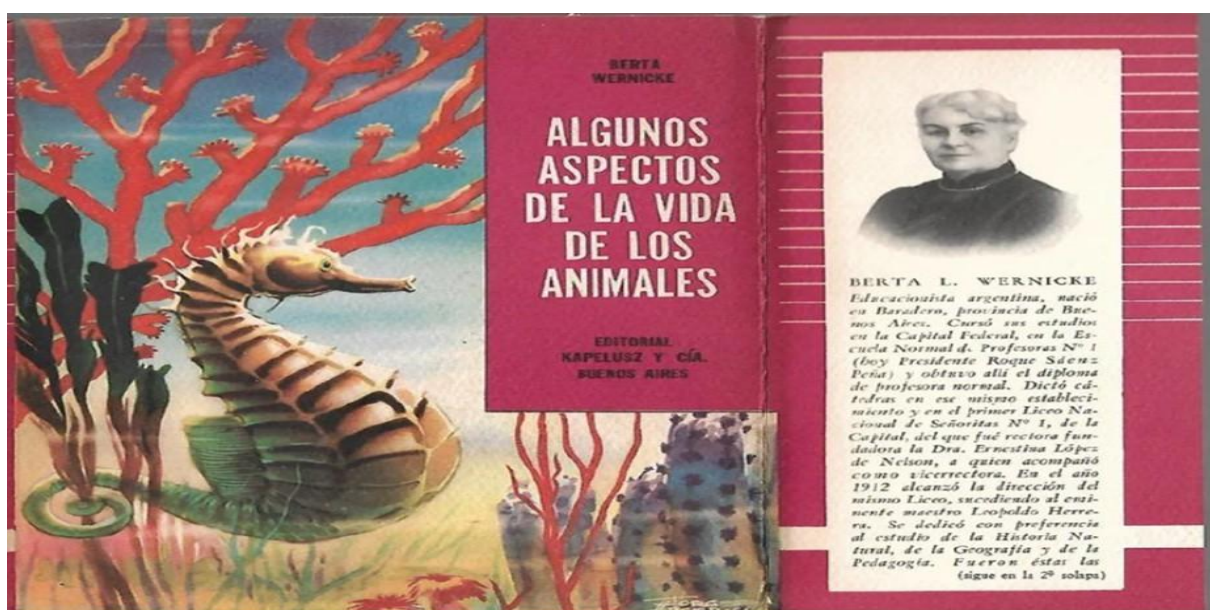
Consulado Geral do Brasil em Buenos Aires
de 6 JUL 1940
PELO CONSUL GERAL
DIRETOR ADJUNTO

Source: familysearch.org FamilySearch (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:KFFT-WJ4?lang=es>: 30 april 2025), Image 90 of 203; National Archive of Brazil (Rio de Janeiro).

Consequently, as we were dealing with two family lines connected to Robert Wernicke, we had to consult various archival records of people from that period to confirm that there was not another Berta Wernicke. The few photographic records we had were of great help. Berta Wernicke's picture from Figure 4 is in one of the two short public biographies we could find up to this point (figure 5). It mentions birth data, studies, and professional career, in sequential order, on the flap of the book *Algunos*

aspectos de la vida de los animales (in English, Some Features of Animal Life), published in 1946 by the prestigious Argentine publishing house Kapelusz. There, it is mentioned that Berta Wernicke was an educator, born in Baradero City, in Buenos Aires province (Argentina), and studied at Normal School of teacher's woman N°1, where she got her degree as a normal-school teacher. At the same time, it mentions that she was a teacher at that same institution and at National Lyceum for Girls N° 1 located in the current Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, with Dr. Ernestina López Nelson as the principal, and later Berta held the position of vice chancellor alongside her. In 1912 she became principal of the same Lyceum School, succeeding the great teacher Leopoldo Herrera, and devoted herself to studying Natural History, Geography, and Pedagogy.

Figure 5 – Cover and flap of the book *Algunos aspectos de la vida de los animales* by Berta Wernicke (1946)



Source: author.

During the first decade of the 20th century, Berta Wernicke published Methodology Course in 1916, a work in which we can recover her voice regarding her pedagogical and didactic thinking. This is precisely the point on which we were interested and that, as previously mentioned, has not been studied yet. We have found information regarding her career as a writer of children's and young adult literature in the book flaps, but we have not found any studies on this matter either, only some

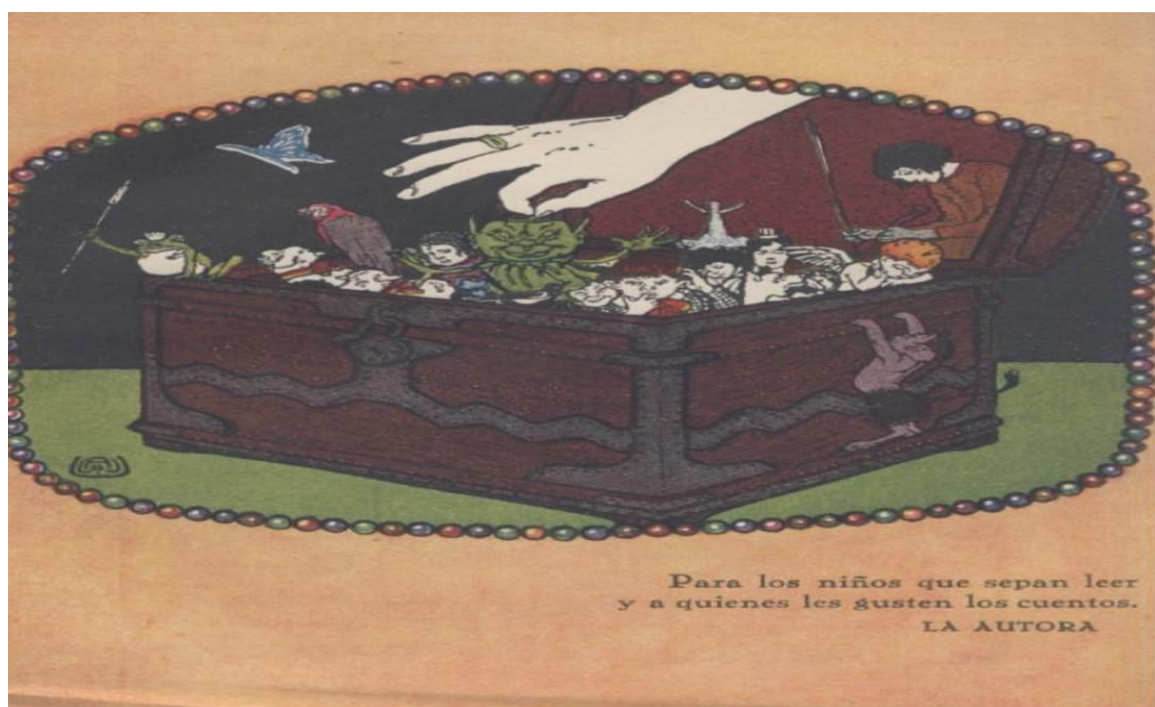
published copies of her series of short stories Yunda. They include Tales from Distant Countries (Wernicke, 1929a), Amawala y otros cuentos de lejanos países (in English, Amawala and Another's Tales from Distant Countries), written in 1931 and published in 1981 by the publishing house Guadalupe. This stage in Berta Wernicke's life is highlighted in another short biography, in one of the Meeting minutes Argentine Society of Geographical Studies (GAEA) (Figure 1), dedicated to the founding members in which she was a board member. From this source, we obtained the year of her death, 1962:

Berta Wernicke (1871-1962). Board member. One of the first Physical Education teachers in the country. When she was in 4th year at National Lyceum, she created, with a group of students, the Association of High School Graduates with the aim of helping each other, and later she became principal. This was the first school former students' association in our country. Soon after, they wrote its Bylaws and Berta Wernicke became secretary. Alongside her brother and his wife, they traveled around the world in yachts designed by the famous Germán Frers. It is said that when they arrived in China, walking down the streets, people followed them, finding strange their clothing and western features, unknown in those faraway places. She became a famous writer, author of books such as: "La lucha por la vida" [The Fight for Life], "Yunda y otros cuentos de lejanos países" [Yunda and Another's Tales from Distant Countries], "Amawala" and "Don Zapallo y otros cuentos" [Mr. Pumpkin and other stories]. Her stories reflected her evenings with her family and approved by them (p. 26)³.

Don Zapallo y otros cuentos para niños, in English Mr. Pumpkin and other Children's Stories, (Wernicke, 1929b) (full title) was published in Madrid by Berta Wernicke and it is her only literary work available at the digital archive in the National Teachers Library (Argentina). Although we cannot look deeply into the book in the present work, it is interesting to read the author's dedication, along with the illustration which calls on various forms of imagination. We believe it is eloquent in expressing her conception of childhood, aligned, as we will see later, with the Methodology Course (1916), as she attributes to children a particular appreciation for literature. The dedication reads: "For children who know how to read and enjoy stories."

³ There is no date on the Meeting minutes. At the beginning, it reads "In this session of the Ordinary General Meeting, on April 28, 1939, the president of GAEA Professor Elina González Acha de Correa Morales, expressed the idea of writing the biography of each of the founding members of the Society, a proposition accepted by all unanimously. (Book II, folio 284)". Surely, this disposition was fulfilled after Berta Wernicke's death, and the passing of another biographical subject, the treasurer Guillermo Pascual Antares, who died in 1981. Available at: <https://www.gaea.org.ar/insti2.htm>

Figure 6 – Don Zapallo y otros cuentos para niños. Dedication of the author to her children's readers (Wernicke, 1927). Illustration by Ulla Bastanier



Source: Digital archive of the National Teachers Library (no bibliographic data).
Available at: <http://www.bnm.me.gov.ar/giga1/libros/00040626/00040626.pdf>

Although this biography from the Argentine Society of Geographical Studies is vague and imprecise on her studies and professional career data, for instance by saying that she studied at Lyceum N°1, it provides some information: she was a member of women students' movements, and her literary activity is connected to the journeys she took with her brother Otto and his wife, Frers' sister.

3 Berta Wernicke's training in the Argentine Society of Geographical Studies

From all the references and documents about Berta Wernicke's travels to other countries, it is important to retrieve her interest linked to her career as a Geography and Natural History teacher which were, probably, consolidated at the GAEA and with the help of Elina González Acha de Correa Morales, also a teacher graduated from Normal School N°1, and other members, many which were German scientists from various fields related to nature, anthropology and ethnographic (Curto, *et al.*, 2008). Berta Wernicke was part of a group of scientists united in GAEA, as already mentioned, founded in 1922 which:

[...] gathered all those interested in knowledge production and debate of information about the physical, economic, and ethnographic characteristics being developed in the Argentine territory, and who, through public action, were trying to spread a disciplinary approach in teaching. It was a scientific epistemological project, in contrast to previous enumerative and memory-based approaches, considered non-scientific by the members of the GAEA (Zusman, 2001, p. 2).

Therefore, the approach to the relationship between the territory's culture and nature was part of Elina González Acha de Correa Morales and Berta Wernicke's training. About the former, we know that:

Her closeness to the Darwinian botanist Eduardo Holmberg, a Natural Science teacher in that educational institution [Normal School N° 1] brought her close to certain scientific and artistic perspectives which highlighted the importance of having Argentine specialists in charge of the scientific activity developed in the country (Zusman, 2001, p. 3).

Holmberg was also one of the founding members of GAEA (Curto *et al.*, 2008). At the same time, the Correa Morales and Wernicke families had close ties with the artistic activity of Julia Wernicke, Berta's sister, and Lía Correa Morales, Elina's daughter. That is how we know that Lía traveled to Europe in 1926 "[...] staying, among other places, in Germany where she visited the animal painter Julia Wernicke (1860-1932), her mother's friend." And that, "Berta Wernicke, Julia's sister, Elina González Acha, and Cecilia Grierson were three of the first graduates from Normal School of Teachers" (Gluzman, 2011, p. 2). We know that the former two women were members of a liberal feminist movement, of "[...] one of the most active institutions at the time in matters of women's rights revindication known as National Women's Council' [...]" (Zusman, 2001, p. 3) which wanted to "[...] encourage the valuing of women's intellectual scientific-academic contributions at a time in which it was not well seen" (Zusman, 2001, p. 3).

Consequently, during the 1920s, Berta Wernicke worked intensely as a Geography and Natural History teacher, and oversaw their professorship and Pedagogy, at Normal School N°1 in the current Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires. She gave this information herself in the Prologue of Methodology Course (Wernicke, 1916) which we will soon analyze. To sum up, Berta Wernicke shared with her colleagues and friends a scientific and pedagogical career linked to Normal School N°1, where she graduated as a teacher and then gave classes, and to the scientific society of GAEA where she was one of the professionals "[...] who set up the institutional beginning of the geographic studies" (Curto *et al.*, 2008, p. 12). Her name

is among those who adhere to the ideals of GAEA and, as in many other cases such as Wernicke's, they later became members. For instance, "Carlos Ameghino (paleontologist and explorer)" and "Juliana Dellenius de Lehmann Nitsche (anthropologist and ethnologist)", among others (Curto *et al.*, 2008, p. 12).

When returning to Berta Wernicke's role as a writer of children's and young adult literature, we can establish a connection between this facet and the guidelines of the GAEA, in which she played a more active role, as also reflected in her previously cited scientific essays. One of the main foundational objectives of GAEA is to "influence the spread and orientation of teaching" (Curto *et al.*, 2008, p. 12). By 1931, Berta Wernicke was a renowned writer of her genre among a group of prominent authors, registered in *El Monitor* (N° 705, September), who published their stories in newspapers and journals. In an opinion piece called "The Children Stories" Adelina Luciani de Bustelo claimed that:

Argentine women stand out for their stories of moral, religious, and patriotic, among other themes, published in books, journals, and newspapers. Delfina B. de Gálvez, Gisberta S. de Kurth, Justa Roqué de Padilla, Olga de Adeler, Carolina D. Alió, Victorina Malharro, Adelia Di Carlo, Berta Wernicke, Susana Calandrielli, Herminia Brumana, etc., are renowned names. In a recent female Latin-American book exhibition, which took place at Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes the Argentine women held a prominent place not only for the number of works they presented but also as exponents of their talent. (Luciani de Bustelo, 1931, p. 213).

Regarding the themes developed by the authors, we understand that Berta Wernicke's stories are classified as "among other themes". When comparing Luciani de Bustelo's enumeration (1931) with the back cover of *de Amawala. Y otros cuentos de lejanos países* published in 1981, and also according to her GAEA biography which informed, in a prominent way, about her travels with her brother Otto, there is an emphasis on the author's journeys.

The back cover reads that the three stories celebrate "the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Yunda* (that is the original publication's title)". And that they "[...] were written by the Argentine educator Berta Wernicke to show young Argentine people the traditions and legends of faraway countries she met on her journeys" (Wernicke, 1981, back cover). In them "[...] there are historical or legendary events in which adventure, courage, love, and justice are skillfully intertwined for the readers' enjoyment and interest" (Wernicke, 1981, back cover). Therefore, these stories are contemporary to

Luciani de Bustelo's opinion piece (1931). They are pedagogical but strongly linked to the objective of teaching other societies and their environment, and how this relationship is embedded in different ways to see and comprehend the world. The ethnographic naturalist education of Berta Wernicke helped her write her narrative literary work, which is consistent with her pedagogical and didactic ideas in the Methodology Course, aimed at teacher training students. In our opinion, this summary shows the originality of her works and that they deserve to be retrieved and brought to light.

4 Berta Wernicke and her didactics for teacher training

As we have already mentioned in this work, Berta Wernicke published in 1916, *Notes on a Special Methodology Course for Primary Education. Part One. Lessons on Geography and Natural History*, the title's abbreviation we have been using, is written in the first person, so we are in direct contact with Berta Wernicke's point of view as a pedagogue and didactic. She prominently discussed, and challenged, the static and conventional teacher training in Normal Schools which, in her opinion, failed to meaningfully contribute to the education of future or novice teachers, particularly within the framework of the fashionable trend of that time known as "object lessons" or "lessons on things". Thus, a big part of the author's conceptual and methodological developments was in line with pedagogical and, we might say, general didactics which she later specified for primary school teaching of Geography and Natural History, articulated with the areas of Language and Mathematics.

We cannot provide an account for the entire book due to the space limitations of this paper. Moreover, as previously mentioned, this constitutes a first approach to the life and work of Berta Wernicke, and some of her references require a more in-depth analysis. For instance, in her Prologue, Berta Wernicke (1916) added a quote related to the teacher's job, which provides different theoretical points of view:

It will have installed [in the teacher's student] a great truth which is that «the teacher is the method», that the tools employed successfully by one may be the cause of failure in the hands of another. «Those who do not question theory, do not experiment; but those who experiment without listening to the voice of experience will fail» says Baumeister (Wernicke, 1916, p. 6).

"The teacher is the method" is a definition that articulates the book, and we are still researching Baumeister. To the present moment, we have found one reference in

the Bibliography section of the journal directed by Víctor Mercante (1919), Archivos de Pedagogía y Ciencias Afines, (in English, Archives of Pedagogy and Related Sciences) (1909), in charge of Alfredo Miguel Aguayo, Pedagogy professor at *Universidad de la Habana*. In footnote 2 of his work “Pedagogy in Universities”, Aguayo refers to “Dr. Baumaister with his book *Handbuch der Erziehungs-und Unterrichtslehre für höhere Schulen*” (München, 1897 *apud* Aguayo, 1909, p. 418) (in English, Education and Teaching Manual for Secondary Schools) when talking about pedagogical seminars that took place in Austrian, Hungarian, Swiss and Italian Universities, in which the “[...] Germanic ideas and methods have influence” (Aguayo, 1909, p. 418).

We will focus on her Prologue (Wernicke, 1916, p. 5-6), written by the author herself, and in some parts of Part I titled “Intuitive Teaching” which is divided into three sections: “a) The Concept of Intuition”; “b) The Intuition Principle as the Basis of General Instruction” and “c) Special Intuitive Teaching – Procedures and Didactic Laws” (Wernicke, 1916, p. 9-28).

In the Prologue, we recognize Berta Wernicke’s voice (1916) about her professional career when she explains the meaning of her writing and publication of the Methodology Course:

This work does not claim the title of «text on special Methodology»; I intend to publish successively, and in this way grouping by subjects, the teaching I have provided to my female students in the Methodology professorship at «Escuela Normal de Lenguas Vivas»⁴. I remember all the difficulties my students had finding an extension of the explanations they had heard in class, and preparing an exposition, having to resort to handwritten notes or long monographs that I corrected. I am addressing, then, the teacher-student, and I will try to be an advisor for the novice teacher because I consider special methodology as the most important and most difficult part of the Pedagogy syllabus; I will try to apply the didactic knowledge I have acquired in my technical studies at Escuela Normal (Wernicke, 1916, p. 5).

Although the book was addressed to teachers, regardless of their gender, Berta Wernicke shared her knowledge as a teacher training educator drawing specifically from her experience in teaching courses to her female students. This validation of her knowledge based on her professional career as a teacher training educator is truly unusual for the time. Not only because, as we have explained before, women were struggling for a place in the scientific and political world, but also because there are no

⁴ Today *Escuela Normal Superior en Lenguas Vivas N° 1 “Presidente Roque Sáenz Peña”* of Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires (Argentina).

other references with this kind of legitimation in other works on teaching methodology from that time. On the contrary, they are always justified by theoretical references, in their definitions and precepts, and not in a professional experience based on female or male teacher training, given that Normal Schools differentiated between genres. (Rodríguez, 2021).

Berta Wernicke continues (1916, p. 5) by saying that: “[...] relatively little has been published among us so far on primary school methodology, at least in terms of original work rather than translations”. This vacancy referred to an issue that had not yet been addressed in the general training of teachers, it was not only about her female students at Normal School N° 1, where she also graduated. For Berta Wernicke, there was a theoretical and methodological gap in teacher training when exercising the teaching job in the classrooms and the difficulties they might encounter. That is why she explained that:

I do not pretend to present anything better; I only believe that in this subject it is not convenient to rely on only one book, and it is favorable to listen to different opinions. As modern Pedagogy is based on children's psychology, teacher trainees should see every aspect through different crystals and hear them expressed in a diverse didactic language. The mental aptitudes and preparation differ among students, and I have come across a simpler way to arrive at its understanding, by suppressing technicalities that students hear at Escuela Normal, as they will assimilate them later in their everyday professional practice, testing the efficiency of the theories. (Wernicke, 1916, p. 5).

Therefore, what was different in Berta Wernicke's Methodology Course (1916) is not only the critical review on teaching at Normal Schools that had been widely discussed in the country and other regions, especially Mexico since the different teacher congresses that took place between the 19th and 20th centuries (Reyes Ruvalcaba, *et al.*, 2006; Rossi, 2022) and also because of publications such as *El Monitor*, which was a symbol of liberal reformists. There are countless documents that question memory-based and encyclopedist teaching in Normal Schools, with references to the same discussions taking place in Europe and the USA. But for Wernicke, it was not just about that, but also about a teacher training education that was not preparing teachers to analyze if the pedagogical and didactic theory was consistent with, we quote again, “their everyday professional practice, testing the efficiency of the theories”, as “teacher trainees should see every aspect through different crystals, and hear them expressed in a diverse didactic language” (Wernicke,

1916, p. 6). She openly confronted her teacher-training colleagues from Normal Schools about this topic:

The Normal-school teachers who leave the classrooms in which they were educated as teachers think they possess all the science knowledge and the whole truth, but when facing a group of students who are expecting everything from them, they realize that many unpredictable factors influence the moment in which they have to put into practice, or not, the good theories. Then they struggle, believing that they must implement those theories; what they see and hear is not on their syllabus — *ergo* — it is wrong. But it may be that he or she is wrong; before recognizing this, they doubt their former teachers who taught them a false doctrine, when the only mistake they made was teaching them only one side of their mission and did not prepare them for eventual obstacles. Instead, if a noble spirit with a broad appearance has guided them, it will have taught them that many roads lead to Rome and will have pointed out the possible contingencies one can anticipate. (Wernicke, 1916, p. 6).

The teacher training educators in Normal Schools were away from the classrooms, they taught “doctrines” that later made the teachers doubt because they did not contemplate that “many unpredictable factors influence the moment in which they have to put into practice, or not, the good theories”. Therefore, they understood that “what they see and hear is not on their syllabus” so it is “wrong.” Berta Wernicke (1916) considered that ideas were imposed about primary education didactics which did not contribute to the teacher's formation. Her whole book followed this problematic core. When she unfolded her theoretical knowledge using references to authors of that time, such as Pestalozzi, Rousseau, and Comenio, she tried to correct how their conceptual definitions had been spreading. She explained the concept of intuition not based on children's psychology, but through a vast explanation of how Comenio was the one who formulated it. We find here another singularity in Berta Wernicke's pedagogical and didactic thought: the teacher is the one who must learn to observe and understand their primary school children, so as not to become carried away by the application of abstract theories. Thus, already in Part I, after explaining how the senses operate in the perception of objects, based on psychophysical child psychology, Berta Wernicke proposed to venture into what she calls the culture of the senses:

The culture of the senses does not concern the school directly, but rather domestic education, as children enter school with the senses already developed. Nature is the best teacher here. (...) Children coming from populated areas go through thousands of impressions every day without perceiving them. Children from the countryside, on the contrary, feel overwhelmed by all the new impressions when they arrive in the city. Therefore, it is an inescapable duty of educators to perfect the senses, especially in those places where life takes us away from nature. But the way to get there is not school, it is a daily experience. (Wernicke, 1916, p. 11-12).

It is remarkable for us how Berta Wernicke reinterpreted the civilization versus barbarism opposition, a central idea of liberal reformist thought that has been extensively studied in Argentina, an opposition she invoked just before the previous quote, referring to “civilized peoples and savage peoples” (Wernicke, 1916, p. 11). She did not mention this opposition again in her book, but what she did was, to our understanding, to reinterpret from her naturalist ethnographic education, how the specific knowledge that teachers must learn to develop, and which they would not find in children’s psychology, would allow them to respond to the unpredictable aspects of their educational practice. Because “It is natural that the history of teaching will provide us with the right guidance. Many prominent pedagogists advise that teaching should be sensitive and concrete, intuitive [...]” However, the ideas of special intuitive teaching are presented as uniform, since they are based on the same foundational approach for general instruction. Yet as often as this idea is asserted, its practical application is equally misrepresented” (Wernicke, 1916, pp. 12–13). What is it, then, that is misrepresented according to Berta Wernicke? It is the failure to acknowledge the social and cultural differences among children, in relation to the forms of intuition they develop in their domestic environments. These forms are not to be seen as inferior or deficient, but rather as distinct. Thus:

It is not possible to suggest topics for intuitive teaching because they vary according to the location, traditions, social classes, and students' knowledge. The teacher must find their own materials inside the students' context, and it should be accessible for everyone: family, school, and others. It will be different for children from the city and the countryside, for those on the mountains and those on the plains, those from the coast and those inland, diverse for the guilds, the parents' jobs, etc. (Wernicke, 1916, p. 13).

5 Conclusions

To begin with, as a recap, we point out that our work is a first approach to Berta Wernicke’s career, starting from primary sources that we are still researching in libraries, bookstores, and digital archives. From the references that we have gathered, her mentioning in publications of that time, as well as studies on the history of education in Argentina is proof of the complex period in history in which the educator participated in didactic debates that took place between the 19th and 20th centuries (mainly the beginning of the 20th), fostered by pedagogical movements of intellectual liberal reformists. These movements, which included feminist groups, particularly

discussed the didactics of the traditional school, a Normal School that she believed was worn out and unproductive for the education of future citizens who would consolidate the modern national State. Given this necessity, teacher training was a point of interest. Male and female teachers were to be trained in scientific disciplines that provided knowledge on how students learned to validate integral teaching methodologies of the school subjects.

Berta Wernicke actively participated in the development of new methodologies for primary education, based on her own career which, we can conclude, was transdisciplinary. Her career included her role as a writer of scientific works for children and young adults, and literature. However, according to our point of view, her singularity, which we are still researching, is in her own experience as a teacher training educator which allowed her to discuss the conceptual theories that she proposed as fundamentals.

Therefore, in what we consider a completely innovative way for that time, especially for a woman, Berta Wernicke discussed didactics and children's psychology, with the readings of the pedagogy classics. She added to her arguments the knowledge she acquired through her naturalist and ethnographical studies from the German school, as well as her affiliation, and at the same time distance, to the pedagogical treaties that fostered intuitive teaching based on excessively abstract definitions of children's realities.

We believe that, at least in Argentina, from our research carried out at Universidad Pedagógica Nacional in the Area of Beginning Literacy, Humanities and Arts Department, our accidental finding of Berta Wernicke, as it was not deliberately researched, opens a new path. It represents an expansion and a rethinking of the historical dimensions of such investigations, in which we have examined various period documents, didactic production among them, based on the understanding that it is not possible to grasp the present of teacher education for primary schools without placing it within a historical framework. In this specific point lie our research questions concerning the reasons why the life and work of Berta Wernicke have only been portrayed in brief and incomplete accounts, disconnected from her overall professional career. Throughout this work, we have sought to advance an initial approach of her biography. This effort has taken up much of our research since, ultimately, a necessary first step was to answer the question: Who was Berta Wernicke? Even if only in a

preliminary way, this question still demands further investigation, as we have continuously stated.

However, we believe we can partially conclude that Berta Wernicke is proof that further investigation on Argentine education history should be carried out, and readings should be reviewed, especially those about the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as works on feminism of that time. Because, based on the explanations that emerged from the investigations referenced throughout this work, we observe that Berta Wernicke, particularly through her didactic work, is a divergence that must be recovered and further analyzed. She unsettles our historiographical narratives about didactics in the period in which she wrote the Methodology Course, and narratives in which we ourselves have been trained, also as women, and through which we have continued to reproduce the idea that the Argentine Normal School teacher has always been, if the expression may be allowed, a daughter of Sarmiento.

If we agree that historical research or, as in our case, research that addresses the historical dimensions of didactics and teacher education, has the responsibility of making women's contributions visible, then we must reconsider how we often operate under the axiom of the teachers of a given era. As if they constituted a single, homogeneous whole, subsumed within the claims that everything they wanted to achieve was in a world that they supposedly accepted was governed by men. In Berta Wernicke's words (1916, p. VI): "[...] theory admits doubts and even reclaims them, looking for new lights and ways in experience". In theory, we would have never imagined that in 1916 in Argentina a teaching methodology for primary school had been written and that it is based on ethnographic arguments, which is our own line of work in didactic research. And even less that it was written by a woman who studied under the Normal School tradition, who used that very knowledge to challenge its civilizing discourse. For Berta Wernicke, children from rural or mountainous areas were not "barbarians" but developed their intuitions differently from urban children—often with advantages, particularly in their understanding of the natural world surrounding them.

To conclude, the decision to publish this provisional work about Berta Wernicke's life and her professional career, particularly highlighting her Methodology Course published in 1916, and which still needs to be studied deeper, aims to contribute to the recognition of the importance of studying didactic production in

Argentina in under-researched periods. It is also intended as part of an ongoing revision that must be pursued through our research and, we hope, through that of others as well. For we hypothesize that, within these inquiries, there may be more singular women like Berta Wernicke yet to be discovered.

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MINI BIOGRAPHY

Carolina Cuesta

Dr. of Linguistics and Literature graduate in the Universidad Nacional de La Plata (Argentina). Associate Professor and Researcher in the Humanities and Art Department. Coordinator of the Beginning Literacy Area. Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (Argentina).

Email: carolina.cuesta@unipe.edu.ar

Translation by Carolina Cuesta