

## COMMON CORE: THE FALSE OPPOSITION BETWEEN *KNOWLEDGE TO DO SOMETHING* AND *KNOWLEDGE ITSELF*<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** Abstract: Defining politics as a signification process, in dialogue with the discourse theory from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, I focus on the current debate about common core in Brazil. Assuming that social antagonism is ineradicable, I defend that the political terrain is always marked by articulations between a plurality of demands. Using the Australian experience as a starting point, I highlight two antagonizing ideas articulated by Brazilian common core, namely: knowledge to do something and knowledge itself. After analyzing the antagonismo between them, I argue that the dispute naturalizes the idea of curriculum as control, an idea that I try to displace by understanding education, justice and democracy as “to come”.

**Keywords:** Brazilian common core. Disciplinary knowledge. Pragmatism. Curriculum policy.

### BASE NACIONAL CURRICULAR COMUM: A FALSA OPOSIÇÃO ENTRE *CONHECIMENTO PARA FAZER ALGO* E *CONHECIMENTO EM SI*

**RESUMO:** Assumindo uma visão da política como processo de significação a partir da teoria do discurso de Ernesto Laclau e Chantal Mouffe, foco o atual debate sobre bases nacionais curriculares comuns no Brasil. Sendo o antagonismo social inerradicável, defendo que o terreno político é sempre marcado por articulações entre uma pluralidade de demandas. Utilizo a experiência da Austrália como ponto de partida para destacar duas ideias que se antagonizam nas discussões sobre base curricular comum no Brasil, quais sejam: *conhecimento para fazer algo* e de *conhecimento em si*. Após analisar o antagonismo entre elas, argumento que a disputa naturaliza o sentido de currículo como controle, ideia que tento deslocar entendendo educação, justiça e democracia como porvir.

**Palavras-chave:** base nacional curricular comum; disciplinas; pragmatismo; políticas de currículo

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We live an intensification of representation control strategies in a moment when identification points proliferate and increase their circulation. The [colonial] control fantasies seem to be reinforced “in everyday scenes of subjectification” (Bhabha, 2003, p.125) at the same time when the world is much more multicultural. In the curriculum scope, being itself a form of representation, such intensification has been felt in different countries, and is explained by an equation that makes quality dependent on control. Employability, global citizenship or, simply, good performances in international evaluations [which do not guarantee either employability or citizenship] are terms present in educational and curricular policies worldwide.

In this context I locate the movements that, in Brazil, have generated demands for a core curriculum for basic education or for the renewal of high school. Many political texts have originated from these movements. *Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional* (National Education Guidelines and Bases Law) -LDB 9394/96 (Brazil, 1996), national curricular parameters [and their associated texts] (MEC, 1998), curricular guidelines for basic education (Brazil, 1998), curricular questioning (MEC, 2010) and other texts in the program Curriculum in Action, curricular guidelines [general] for basic education (Brazil, 2010), national education plan (MEC, 2014), towards a curricular policy for basic education (MEC, 2014), education nation (Brazil, 2015) are some of the different texts, prepared by government instances, in which the demand for a national core curriculum is provided.

We do not have, yet, a final document about common national bases that may serve as object of this text, but, rather, proposals for debate, some formal, others more elusive, such as Internet pages, opinions and articles published in newspapers and magazines or presented by means of oral communication. The desire that an academic text, such as this one, be an intervention piece in the debate makes the analysis urgent and creates methodological requirements in relation to the political documents to be focused on. What is currently available as object of analysis is a web of texts that interconnect, but do not produce a single meaning for the idea of national core curriculum, and I will use these texts to attempt to deal with the political process underway. My intent is to contribute with the sliding, echoing meanings that circulate on the field, but one tries to eliminate from the debate.

I do not intend to avoid the fact that texts are always reiterations, translations without origin, I use the National Education Plan as the “initial” representation for the political debate in which I am interested. The document with which the Union, the states, the Federal District and the cities are forced to agree states that “the implementation

of learning and development rights and goals that will make up the national core curriculum for basic education” (p. 51) and for “high school” (p. 52). I stand away from the controversy that involved, throughout the plan proceedings, exchanging the expression “learning expectations”<sup>1</sup> with the expression “learning and development rights and goals”, not because it is not important, but because they have been linked to evaluation and school flow (target 7), blurring the distinction that was intended. With this phrase, I do not contend that there is a direct relation between national core curriculum and evaluation, as the meaning disputes at stake are multiple. I am interested here in perceiving the struggles to assign meaning and some of the political subjects that are constituted in them.

I operate, for such, under the notion of politics as power actions designed to produce social objectivity (Mouffe, 2000) or, in the terms I have been adopting (Macedo, 2010), produce signification. I avoid, however, stating that such objectivity is capable of eliminating the antagonistic natures of the social, and argue that, even if temporarily under control, antagonism is ineradicable and constitutes the social as the field of possibilities, as an ontologically political space (Mouffe, 2000). Thus, the policies I will analyze here are attempts to find a hegemonic meaning for the national core curriculum, which requires excluding meanings that are antagonistic to it, in the form of an exterior that ends up being constitutive of it. It is an exterior devoid of concrete content, a constituting ghost that keeps on inhabiting political decisions, and that makes it possible to use discourse theory as a deconstructive desire. As Mouffe (2000) highlights, the constitutive exterior is not a concrete other, but “the symbol of what makes each one of us possible” (p.29).

In this sense, social objectivity (or “us”) is simply the effect of a power operation that produces social equivalence within a social whose constitutive mark is difference. The condition for a meaning to reach signification in its totality is the “pure cancellation of all difference” (Laclau, 2011, p.70), thereby giving rise to an empty signifier that would enable signifying both the social systematicity and the constitutive exterior. As signifiers that represent totality only tend to be empty, such signification is not possible, the decision about which signifier will play such role is a political issue, i.e., the decision for one or the other signifier as the one capable of representing an absent totality is produced by interventions that associate a particular meaning to the empty signifier. This contingent completion of an empty signifier due to particular demands made momentarily equivalent is what I am interested in analyzing, in order to understand the “precarious articulations (...)

always threatened by a constitutive exterior” (Laclau, 2000, p.192) or the discourses that are provided as the answer to signification crises.

I understand that the demand for national core curriculum is one of these empty signifiers that became empty throughout at least four decades, which enables that it is presented as solution for a collective “us” to improve education. Assuming, as Derrida, that all signification is always postponed, national core curriculum complete the meanings of a quality education, at the same time are signified in political struggles for signification. In a previous text, (Macedo, 2014), I have argued that they have stabilized with the idea of quality, due the elimination of unpredictability in educational policies we have been producing in Brazil<sup>3</sup> (Macedo, 2014). I intend to develop the same argument here through a different path, namely, the deconstruction of the alleged opposition between a curriculum [or a core curriculum at national level], on the one hand, committed to scientific knowledge, and, on the other hand, guided by learning competencies or standards.

My question is not how “they” - the government that, we need to account for it, transitioned from social democracy to the workers’ party with few changes regarding curriculum and evaluation policies - create the need for national core curriculum, and why we, who know the answers, are not heard. I operate with the idea that the political space is marked by an ineradicable difference and we act on it, us and them, trying to tame it, signifying positions, producing politics as representation and control of the political (Mouffe, 2000). In a previous text (Macedo, 2014), I argue that the social networks involved [and produced] in preparing the texts we have named governmental are formed by public and private agents that signify not only the core curriculum, but education itself. Upon reading Ball (2012), partnerships that have been constituting “a new form of governmentality” and creating “new forms of sociability” (p. 9). The reterritorialization of policies of which the author speaks - in which the borders between public, private, philanthropic, non-governmental are constantly being displaced - explains the antagonism that constitutes the social and, at the same time, how much it is tried to control it.

Here I displace myself - aware that such antagonisms, which are part of the political struggle for hegemony - towards other subjects in this web, focusing on what Taubman (2009), in an exquisite text, calls a pedagogical language. This language offers, for the author, the technical support for great part of the American teachers to support an evaluation culture that takes away their autonomy and the control over their own work. In the American reality, the author emphasizes the focus on learning as one of the discourses that favor

this adhesion, an argument similar to the one I developed in my analysis of the movement which resulted in the development of the latest curricular guidelines in Brazil (Macedo, 2012). I now ask myself, therefore, how those of us, who have the school space in our hearts, have also produced discourses that help hegemonizing the inexorable link between national core curriculum and quality education.

Two of the pedagogical discourses that largely circulate in recent debates defend pragmatic knowledge and *knowledge itself* as the central core of the curriculum. Presented as antagonistic in academia, they fight for room in the national core signification. My argument is that this dispute naturalizes the idea of curriculum as control, contributing for the hegemonization of this signification, which is the idea I intend to displace. My argument attempts to recover a signification that we have been trying to remove from the debate, i.e. the centrality of school as the privileged locus of the curricular action - a place “tainted” by unpredictability.

The signification I attempt to recover, with the usual betrayal that accompanies any recovery, is the heritage of thinkers such as Anísio Teixeira and Paulo Freire, as well as everyday life studies by Nilda Alves. As Pinar (2010) suggests, a heritage that marks curricular studies in Brazil with “dynamism and excitement” (p. 211). The value of school experience that, not only here, but also in the USA and in great part of the world, current [and old] policies postulate as antagonistic to one another and to the quality of education they promise to produce. In the words of Pinar (2010), the antithesis of the “perverse instrumentalism (...) always emphasizing how we go from here to there” (p. 211), which has marked curricular policies worldwide.

I build this argumentation based on three ideas. In the first section, I return to the Australian experience to which I arrived due to the importance it has been gaining in current debates since the document Education Nation has been developed. My goal, with this, is to emphasize that we can learn more with this experience than what has been proposed, not only with its alleged right actions, but also with its problems and with criticism that has circulated in the Australian academic environment. A relevant aspect in what we must learn is that, there, also, the antagonism between pragmatic knowledge and *knowledge itself* has occupied part of the academic debate around the meanings of curriculum, and have reverberated in curricular guidelines. This debate is the focus of the following section, in which I explore both meanings, attempting to demonstrate that, although antagonistic in the academic discourse, they have become equivalent in completing the meanings of national core curriculum in

Brazil [or of national curriculum in Australia]. Finally, I highlight the importance of activating the constitutive exterior that enables such discourses of curricular control, but that inhabits them, i.e., school - locus of the unpredictable - as the space and time in which the curriculum is enunciated and gains existence.

## OTHER TEACHINGS OF THE AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE

International experiences have been constantly mentioned in the entire debate around national core curricula. Louzano's<sup>4</sup> study, in which the author analyzed "national curriculum documents in countries in the OECD and in the Latin American region" (slide 4), was exhaustively presented in meetings about core curricula. Observing what is done around the world and learning what goes well seem to be the common denominator that has brought to light different experiences, such as the American common core, which I analyze elsewhere (Macedo, 2010) or the Finland national curriculum, top of PISA's international ranking. Working out always seems to be associated to good results in large scale evaluations, whether national or international, although Sahlberg (2015)<sup>5</sup> highlights that the Finnish experience wagers on teacher qualification rather than in curricular centralization aiming at good test performances. More recently, the Australian example has been quoted by the Secretary of Strategic Affairs, Mangabeira Unger, as "particularly revealing and attractive", as the country is also a large federation, "a promising international experience".

I do not intend to argue here that international experiences may not [or should not] be used, in a xenophobic position, incompatible with a world that is more and more interconnected. I intend, however, defend that such experiences are "revealing" of much more than that to which we have been paying attention. All of these experiences are produced in a political space from where difference may not be eradicated, they generate a controversial debate in which many meanings circulate, despite the attempts to halt it or of the power effects over what may be done. I briefly try to account for some echo-critics of the Australian experience that may provide us with other lessons, in addition to those highlighted by those who defend common cores.

The initial motivation of the Australian experience has to do with the country's federative nature, pointed out by Unger as one of the reasons for which this experience is so attractive to us. It is an attempt to surpass a much stronger federative pact than the one we experience in Brazil. The creation of ACARA- Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, whose effects



have been widely analyzed (Harris-Hart, 2010, Atewh & Singh, 2011; Brennan, 2011), has revealed curriculum centralization in a country where, historically, state power was fully responsible for education and curriculum. In Brazil, albeit, by the federative pact, cities and states are responsible for basic education and high school, there is an overlap of competences at the base of the same educational legislation, especially regarding curriculum and funding.

If differences regarding federalism are obvious, the rhetoric that justifies curricular centralization is similar. As Harris-Hart (2010) points out, in Australia, “successive federal governments (of different political sides) have systematically used rhetoric arguments to generate a perception of lack of credibility and crisis” (p.313). In continuation, the author emphasizes that “this has also generated the false perception that a national curriculum is a panacea for a wide variety of educational problems, that is the perception that a standardized national curriculum will result in greater access, equity and educational results for all students” (p. 313). This is not too different from what we hear everyday in Brazil: the national core curriculum “will promote equity, as it ensures all Brazilians will have access to a set of knowledges considered essential to achieve their goals in life”<sup>6</sup>. Or, rather, in the words of the Secretary of Education, the “core base is one of the strategies that the Brazilian society, through the National Education Plan, decided to establish as a priority for a qualitative leap in education”<sup>7</sup>.

The strange consensus with which one attempts to justify interventions is not, however, that simple. The federative pact does not suppress the antagonism of social relations. In the Australian case, the pact generated the a national curriculum, whose writing started in 2009, continued being an object of attack by antagonist political groups and, as early as 2014, the curriculum agreed on wa revised based on the election of more conservative groups. The speech of the Australian Secretary of Education that led the revision explains the absence of consensus about what must be taught: “the history curriculum does not acknowledge the legacy of the western civilization, and does not give due prominence to important Australian history, such as Anzac Day.”<sup>8</sup>. According to Donnelly<sup>9</sup>, one of the two curricular revision leaders, the idea of the reform was to restore “the significance of Judeo-Christian values in our institutions and ways of living”, reducing “the diversity promoted in an uncritical manner”. These debates explain what part of the curricular theory has defended, at least, since the 70s, that there is not “a set of knowledges considered essential to make life projects concrete”. If certain things

must be taught, the question remains about who defines such items, a question that the conservative turn in Australia reminds us it is relevant. On the one hand, if this is important for some, several other studies (Aubusson, 2011; Atweh & Goos, 2011) suggest reasonable consistence and standardization of curriculum in disciplinary fields, even in the absence of a national guideline.

Throughout the entire controversial process, as it has been happening in Brazil, the Australian academic and educational community has positioned itself in relation to the national curriculum, attempting, thus, to interfere in politics. There is criticism to the participation process used by ACARA, as it would have left out the very need for a national curriculum, focusing only on form and content issues (Atweh and Singh, 2011). Allum (2009) highlights that, as it usually happens in Brazil, the time to discuss was not sufficient for a deeper analysis of the topic. There is a concern regarding the effect of curricular standardization over teachers agency and over their active role as mediators (recontextualizer) of policies (Briant and Doherty, 2012). Studies in different field of knowledge scope, especially those that deal with contents more clearly assumed as history-dependent, shall also be taken into account.

The main questioning, however, are associated to the key promise of national curriculum, that is, the one that reduces inequalities. The Australian academic community has also been indicating that an agenda based on the “efficient use of resources to meet international curricular standards, and to ensure curricular consistency” (Atweh and Singh, 2011, p.190) is not appropriate for such purposes. It seems clear to Brennan (2011) that the Australian model allowed the country to perform well in international comparisons, in which the quality of its system is highlighted. However, in terms of reducing educational inequalities, results are not so exciting. Studies in Australia seem to reach to the same conclusion that led Ravitch (2013) to start her campaign against the American Common Core, that is, that curricular centralization [and its relation to evaluation] has increased inequalities, rather than reduced them.

I will not go into further detail about the Australian debate, I have used these references only to explain that the community of curriculum scholars in Brazil is not the only one to oppose curricular core at national level. I move on to a brief description of ACARA's proposal to introduce both pedagogical discourses I intend to focus on throughout the next section. At first, it is important to highlight that, although more sophisticated than the Common Core or similar experiences, the main role of the Australian national curriculum is,



in its own definition, “to set high consistent standards for what all Australian youths need to learn as they progress in schooling”<sup>10</sup>.

The basic curriculum structure is disciplinary and annual, and disciplines or subjects articulated in knowledge areas. At a more general articulation level, the curriculum also includes cross-curriculum priorities and “general abilities”, which are maintained for all disciplines and areas. The first are designed to “equip Australian youths with abilities, knowledge and understanding that allow them to effectively engage in the globalized worlds and thrive in it”, and are named as “histories and cultures aborigine and islanders in the Torres strait”; “engagement of Asia and Australia in Asia”; and “sustainability”. Regarding general abilities - literacy; numerical literacy; TIC ability; critical and creative thinking; personal and social ability; ethical understanding; and intercultural understanding - are described as intended to “help all youths in Australia to become successful apprentices, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens”.

For each discipline, an overview is provided, subsequently unfolded year after year. In the overview of disciplines, the rationale, the goals, the content structure, the standard achievement, the suggestions on how to deal with diversity among students (special needs, gifted, and dialect speakers), general abilities, and cross-curriculum priorities are provided, in a general manner. Year after year, a detailing of what is named content descriptions - actually, a set of goals - may be identified, as well as their intersections with general abilities and cross-curriculum priorities. At this moment, also, the description of contents is supplemented by a list of standard achievements. It is a detailed curricular document that leaves little room for recontextualization by the teachers, as the literature has pointed out.

Strategies adopted by the Australian curriculum to deal with current issues in the field of curriculum are not very different from those used in different experiences of national curriculum, among them, the National Curricular Parameters themselves. The debate, insoluble and still understood by many as key in the curriculum field, between the ideas of *knowledge itself* and *knowledge to do something* is addressed in the form of a layered curriculum. On the one hand, classical disciplines/subjects are used as source of content, treated as *knowledge itself*. On the other hand, it is assumed that such disciplines do not meet contemporary challenges, and topics are proposed as well as, especially, cross-curriculum abilities, for whose achievement, knowledge is the only means. This sliding is complemented by the reference to learning standards, demanded by test culture at international level. As it has been happening is many national curricula, the solution for the

Australian curriculum was to mix highly structured knowledge from the disciplinary fields, and the flexibility requirements the the ideas of general abilities and standard achievements seem to require.

From this tangle I want to derive the debate that interests me for this text, between *knowledge itself* and *knowledge to do something*. I focus here in the distinction between both, but I remind you I intend to deconstruct it as a way to release curriculum meanings that are being expelled from the curriculum field by this debate. I will argue that the articulations we observe in the Australian curriculum between *knowledge itself* and pragmatic knowledge are possible due to the focus in the teaching, that has as a constitutive exterior the unpredictability the characterizes education, and with which a well qualified teacher is capable of dealing “productively” [whatever this means],

## KNOWLEDGE TO DO SOMETHING AND KNOWLEDGE IN ITSELF

The discussion about knowledge holds a special place in curricular theory, with the consequent confrontation between the notions of *knowledge itself* and *knowledge to do something*. It is not possible to say that this is a recent dispute, as, at the start of the past century, authors such as Dewey defended pragmatism in opposition, at the time, to a conservative view of *knowledge itself*. The dispute is long and complex, and this complexity, at times, is hidden in alleged consensuses. The prevalence of disciplinary curricula, which proposes to mimic, in school, the scientific fields with higher or lower awareness of the recontextualization processes, indicates the importance of the *knowledge itself*. The recent emphasis on “external managerialism and student progress” (Yates and Collins, 2012, p.2) updates a tradition of the knowing how to do that, according to Yates and Collins (2012), echoes the progressive defense of procedural knowledge. When distrust in relation to modern science and the disciplinarization of knowledge broaden, critical theories, which have historically opposed the abstraction of the disciplinary curriculum, start to defend it.

This small picture is designed to explain my understanding that curricular theory is political, that is to say, is part of the struggle for signifying, among others, meanings for school curriculum. This implies rejecting the idea that it is built by epistemologically consistent and immutable bodies. The approximations or equivalences among positions once distinct, leads to a more contextual political analysis, which is capable of understanding articulations that, also in the academic field, occur to hegemonize positions. Going a little beyond this, I also operate with the idea that what I have just called academic

field, is not a very useful delimitation, in the sense that the meaning flows, and the attempts to control them, extrapolate delimitations of such nature. For this text's purposes, this means that the meaning production system with which I operate slides between the academic discourses and the official policy documents, as well as among the different texts available on the medias.

Thinking this way, I assume that nowadays (in Brazil) there is a struggle to hegemonize the meaning of school curriculum that establishes itself around the term knowledge, which is distinct and contextual, as any political struggle, but the reiterates meanings we have been sharing in spaces, whether academic or not, throughout the years. With one side, demands around what I call *knowledge to do something* are associated, and, with the other, the demands in defense of *knowledge itself* are placed. In this section, I still distinguish these two demands that seem to be very clearly given in the discussion of national core curricula, so that, then, I can bring them closer as part of a broader political game in defense of the (national) curriculum control.

### ***Knowledge to do something***

*Knowledge to do something* is expressed in the curriculum in many ways, among which, the proposal of “general abilities” in the recent Australian curriculum, the competences used in the testing matrices in Brazil (where those required by the ENEM have been used as examples), the American Common Core standards, or even the oldest example of the French curriculum, from 1997. I understand that this pragmatic concept of knowledge is hegemonized in a set of articulations that approach neoliberal managerialism and the progressive idea of “learn to learn”, as well as the proposals of teaching by competences, defended both by Moring (2011) and Perrenoud (1999), and by authors associated to education for work (Ramos, 2001). I operate with these references because I focus on the debate that has been taking place in Brazil and want to argue that the legitimacy of the neoliberal managerialism proposals is achieved, in part, for its articulation with a set of references that curricular theory dresses with a positive aura.

I assume, to understand this articulation, that Labaree's (1998) description of the American educational experience may be useful to Brazil. The author argues that such experience lives in the tension between the democratic equality, efficiency and social mobility principles. For the author, the social mobility discourse, associated to new forms of managerialism, triumphs in the sense that it solves the tension between the first two principles. Although democratic equality and social efficiency share the public nature of education

are antagonistic because the latter is based on social stratification, which tensions the idea of equality. Mobility, even if maintaining strict association, also defended by efficiency theories, between education and the market, treats education as a private good, consumable, capable of ensuring the status of those who have access to it. With this strategy, stratification is less visible, education becomes an individual and different demand, and the articulation between social mobility and democratic equality becomes feasible. The externalization of the value of education — replaced with employment, prestige, comfort — finds a parallel in Lyotard's (1998) reading on the externalization of knowledge in relation to the subject. Education or, for the author, knowledge, separate from its formative value, becomes operational and is legitimized by its ability to optimize performances. This happens, as Labaree (1998) argues, without tainting the aforementioned rhetoric of equality that one seeks to ensure with education.

The exterior that constitutes the articulation between optimized performance and democratic equality is formed by social stratification discourses, via school. Such discourses point out, in many cases, to the highly structured knowledge, identified, in critical theories, as that which keeps less economically favored groups away from school. Therefore, scientific disciplines [or classes, in case of school] are doubly rejected in this articulation. Firstly, because they are the source of structured knowledge, potentially stratifying. Secondly, because they legitimize their contents by criteria of truth that have lost room in the post-modern world; Oddly, post-modernity seems, here, to articulate with critical proposals in defense of curriculum in which a set of more general knowledges (living, acting, doing), legitimized by justice and efficiency, gains room. Education that intends to provide “to the system, players capable of conveniently ensuring their role before the pragmatic posts required by the institutions” (p. 89) is seen as the one capable of ensuring democratic equality.

The tradition of objectives associated to contents - which, with some liberty, could be called social efficiency - is opposed to general competencies (or general abilities) capable of dealing with new forms of organization and legitimization of knowledge and, mostly, may be dominated by all. Both critical theory and progressive theory have been, historically, denouncing the abstract nature of disciplinary knowledge. The discourse of competence is certainly not the first one to point to contextual knowledge and, certainly, does it in a distinct manner than that advertised by both one and the other. As Yates and Collins (2012) assume, however, by opposing abstract knowledge, such discourse presents itself as an answer to a series of

demands, from demands for democratic equality to those posed by the post-modern condition in relation to legitimation of knowledge.

Although it is clear in the pedagogical (and managerial) literature that the term competences has many and floating meanings (Macedo, 2002, Ramos, 2001). What I am interested in here, is in highlighting its contextual nature and how much it has been, in this same literature, faces as enabling the equality ideal of which Labaree speaks. This includes the senses associated to modern structuralist thought, as well as to post-modern condition. In the first case, for example purposes only, the senses are linked to the Piagetian thought, appropriated, for instance, by Perrenoud (1999), or even the use of the concept of habitus by Bourdieu, used in the French reform of the 90s (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, 1994). Competence is associated to the mobilization of knowledges so as to activate schemes that act as tools in concrete situations<sup>11</sup> (Piaget, 1974). Even if the Piagetian thought, faithful to modern structuralism, argue in favor of a set of more general schemes - that enable subject to perform a set of abstract operations, such as conceptualize, compare - they only are mobilized due to concrete situations always understood as new.

With regards to (in the terms of Lyotard) the post-modern condition or to contemporaneity, competences related to transdisciplinarity (Morin, 2011), when modern disciplinarization seems to be insufficient to account for, as previously mentioned, of new forms of legitimizing knowledge, but also (and maybe especially) to the new forms of work and social organization. It is argued that the speed of knowledge production and of work post changes requires continuous learning ability, argument that also justified the progressive "learn to learn" of the 1920. With this collapse of almost one century, I am simply suggesting the sense of accelerated change is one of the factors to take into account when the demands for contextual alternatives to schooling are increased. Even if in the 20s of the previous century, the knowledge legitimization crisis of which Lyotard (1998) speaks, is not in the horizon, the speed of industrialization of American society provided visibility to the time hiatus between going to school and using what was learned in the life context.

These few senses of competence I highlighted are not intended to argue that neoliberal managerialism demands for a *knowledge to do something* are the same defended by different pedagogical discourses throughout the last century. In addition to being unsustainable, such argument would be anachronistic and not too useful. As Laclau (2011) reminds us, the political articulation for hegemony does not destroy the difference between the demands in articulation, only

makes them equivalent in relation to a constructive exterior that, here, I assumed as being knowledge in itself and the stratification that it potentializes. Therefore I propose that there is an articulation between the demand to mobilize fragments of these discourses and that such articulation potentializes hegemony, in curricular policies, of the idea of knowledge as *knowledge to do something*.

### ***Knowledge in itself***

Knowledge as value in itself (use value) has a long story of antagonism in relation to pragmatic approaches, whether in philosophy, or in the pedagogical field. Regarding the latter, it is important to remind Saviani's (2008) criticism, in *Escola e Democracia* (School and Democracy), to procedural approaches of progressive new-school. Saviani's arguments to support historical-critical pedagogy are similar to those mobilized by supporters of *knowledge in itself*, that is, that democratic equality, in Labaree's terms, may only be achieved by means of mastering structured knowledge. Maybe we may not say that historical-critical pedagogy defends *knowledge in itself*, as it highlights the concrete dimension (in the Marxist sense) of all knowledge, but in it there is, for sure, the acknowledgment of the potential of abstract disciplinary knowledge. I focus, here, however, not in this pedagogy, as I am interested only in the argument that suspects the assumption that highly structured knowledge of disciplinary approaches produces stratification and increases inequalities.

Recently, this argument has been largely publicized due to what I will call a Michael Young crusade to "recover" the focus on structured knowledge as means to ensure a less unequal education. This is a crusade against the New Sociology of Education's own conclusions, of which he was an exponent in the 70s, that highly structured knowledge of disciplinary fields, especially the most abstract ones, kept the less favored groups away from school and produced inequalities (Young, 1971). The impact of the positions defended by Young may be measured by the capillarity that his production - considering the quotation indexes of his texts -, as well as by the influence in educational policies in countries such as Brazil. In recent seminars for the discussion of national common core (or in the discussions that culminated in the curricular guidelines<sup>12</sup>), Young has been a remarkable presence, whether by his direct participation, or by his appropriation by authors of great influence on the field in Brazil, especially Moreira (2010, 2012).

Young's (2013) revision of his own critical position in relation to *knowledge in itself* starts from the principle that New Sociology of



Education, as other critical currents, contributed to explain the power relations in which the curriculum are historically produced. Critical thought would have been important to highlight how knowledge of the powerful molded curricula, but “neglected how much some forms of knowledge give more power than others to those to which they have access, regardless of their origins” (p. 104). Thus, maintaining his defense path that curriculum theory has to respond to epistemological questions, Young argues in favor of a (powerful) knowledge whose domination is a condition for social justice (in Labaree’s typology, democratic equality).

Differently from the argumentation defended in the start of critical theory, in which knowledge was taken as a social construct as any other and, therefore, there was no separation between school and daily knowledge, *knowledge in itself* is described as distinct from experience knowledge. It is not contextual, specialized and structurally differentiated (Young, 2008, 2013), which would enable greater generalization in which lies “the intellectual power it gives to those that have access to them” (Young, 2008, p.14). This is, therefore, a potentially universal and generalizable knowledge, a “cognitively higher knowledge” (Young, 2013, p. 118), presented as a foundation for a “just and sustainable democracy” (Young, 2013, p.118).

It is undoubtedly easier to use concepts, such as specialization and structuring in the field of natural sciences, more vertical fields, according to Bernstein (1999) that, along with Durkheim, is a reference for Young’s realistic posture. Young’s (2008, 2013) examples, however, are also addressed to human and social sciences, assuming, also in these cases, that there are universal truths and feelings. At the same time, it is important to highlight that, although operating with the assumption that scientific disciplines are sources of new knowledges, in Young’s defense, a concern with pedagogization. The author does not start from the principle that all school subjects are reflections of scientific fields, operating with the idea that there are recontextualizations guided by pedagogical targets.

The defense of *knowledge in itself* is based on a “foundational understanding of knowledge” (Ballarin, 2008, p.510), “sustained by strong notions of objectivity and truth”(p. 517). In this sense, Young’s discussion (with Muller, 2007) is centered in the definition of criteria, both scientific and pedagogical, to define the knowledge that is relevant for school, for which authority arguments are used given by the scientific fields (understood as social fields). In Young’s (2008) reading of Bernstein, “strong boundaries among the domains of knowledge and between school and non-school knowledge, that plays a key role in

defining students identities and are key conditions for their progress” (p. 16). That is to say, “disciplines are sources of identities both for students and for teachers” (Young, 2013, p.113). The curriculum that enables social justice and democratic equality is, therefore, the one in which knowledge is selected by a quality that is intrinsic to it, “more reliable, closer to the truth”, even if “not fixed or given”.

The struggle for hegemonizing the defense of *knowledge in itself*, although currently facing disbelief in its significance or validity, is not one of the most difficult ones. It is supported in the strong hegemony of Modern thought and in the shared belief that scientific fields are source of true knowledge. The antagonistic cut to such position is, in Young’s works, as in several other authors of Marxist matrix, the relativism associated to post-structuralism, constructivism and neoutilitarianism (Young, 2008; Young & Muller, 2007). It opposes, therefore, in the educational field, among others, to the approach of *knowledge to do something*, which requires legitimation by context.

## ILLUSORY PROMISE

As I have been arguing, knowledge to do something and knowledge in itself are pedagogical discourses in dispute in the signification of the national core curriculum, in Brazil, as it happened and happens, among others, in the Australian debate. Taking the Australian experience, and looking at proposals that circulate among us, however, I now seek to understand how these discourses, produced as antagonistic, have built equivalence relations in curricular proposals issued by the government. Disciplinary fields and emphasis on knowledge are side by side, in recent documents, with general competences or general capacities. Maybe only a certain epistemological purism, which I have already stated I do not have, could explain the surprise with which I built the problematization to finish this text. I keep insisting in formulating it, because I understand that such equivalence tells about what we attempt to exclude from the meaning of national core curriculum, the exterior that stabilizes it, constituting is as its other (phantasmic).

I focus on the distinction between the character located and contextual of *knowledge to do something*, and the universal and generalizable of *knowledge in itself*. Even if this is not the only distinction between them, I assume it condensates a series of others. Although, as Laclau (2011) teaches us, equivalence does not presuppose equality, my first movement is that of deconstructing part of the distinction between *knowledge to do something* and *knowledge in itself* as they have been represented in recent debates about the national core curriculum. I

do this, however, focusing on the constitutive exterior that produces equivalence that interests me, that is, a set of social demands that does not find answers in the action by the public power. Although the political struggle is located and contextual, I do not refer, here, exclusively to high social inequality rates in Brasil, that, with with recent reductions. I refer, on the other hand, to its impossibility to answer demands for lower social inequality, by a public government more and more involved in “fluid political communities” (Ball, 2012, p.5), which articulate public, private, philanthropic, and create new governmentability forms. If they are not met, such demands operate as constitutive exterior that makes social justice and democratic equality powerful signifiers in legitimizing the policies conducted by these very fluid political communities on behalf of the State.

It is around this signifiers, as we have seen, that *knowledge to do something* and *knowledge in itself* defenses have historically articulated, at times, in antagonistic forms. Antagonism, however, seems to be blurred in recent times. Intervention designed to achieve social justice and democratic equality have, in political contingency, articulated *knowledge to do something* and *knowledge in itself* both in public governmental policies and in academic texts. The maxim of the hour, in addition to the desire of all hegemony, is that we can generate a fully inclusive policy, capable of overcoming all antagonism. The situated and contextual nature of the *knowledge to do something* is universalized in competences described in a generic manner, requirements of policy that imposes, at some level, measurement as means of certification. At the limit, what Labaree (1998) called social mobility, such certification becomes credentialism, produced, ultimately, by the same community that accredits certain knowledges as truth, and that controls what is worth as *knowledge in itself*. Regarding this universal and generalizable knowledge, its externality in relation to the subject and transforms it in a product to be acquired, with exchange value for social justice and democratic equality. In this sense, it produces what Butler and Anastasiou (2013) call “possessive individualism” (Loc.205) that is on the base of social mobility, as defined by Labaree (1998). The certification of ownership of knowledge in the market also requires that measurement and the pretension that the most valuable knowledge possible in exchange for goods promised. This way, I argue, that both curricular discourses promise the acquisition of certified goods - whether knowledges or abilities to do - and are articulated in the promise of compliance with the demand for social justice and democratic equality.

Obviously, those who disagree with the need for common national bases for curriculum are not at all against justice and

democracy. We simply know that the market may not dispense with stratification, even though it hides this need. We know, as I have argued in other occasions (Macedo, 2010, 2013b), that the promise will never be fulfilled. As it keeps being repeated, however, it justifies the intervention that does not produce either the results promised, or those that we may aspire in a responsible manner. Those of us who do not want national core curriculum also believe in justice and democracy, but not as a promise to be fulfilled. We understand that they belong to the becoming, they will never be reached once and for all (let alone measure whether they have been reached). We do not believe that one may say beforehand what is one or the other without destroying them. In sum, we value justice and democracy, but we do not want to treat them as regulating ideas.

Why do we refuse this? Because, as regulating ideas, as a determinable horizon to which education will provide access, they have been restricting the education meanings to what may be “exchanged” for them. Because they have been expelling from education all difference and uniqueness that are not, by nature, advanced and without which education, justice and democracy do not make any sense. Because education, justice and democracy require alterity to be lived as such. Because they need to preserve “always, in themselves, and shall do it (...) this scatological relation with the becoming of an event and a uniqueness, of a non-advancing alterity” (p. 92)

The place that those of us, who oppose national core curriculum, want to hold is not, therefore, that of prescription and control<sup>13</sup>. We want, on the contrary, to activate a non-advancing alterity, what I have been calling unpredictable (Macedo, 2014). In terms of public policies, the wager on the unpredictable may seem idilic, but there is no other option for policies that intend to educate. It is a wager that constitutes, undoubtedly, a challenge more difficult than producing a list (of contents or abilities to do) that serves as national core curriculum. It involves qualifying teachers well, but mostly giving them work conditions and compatible salaries, investing in schools and in the work already performed there. Finally, investing in valuing education rather than the control that destroys it as an intersubjective enterprise.

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## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Text developed in the research project scope funded by CNPq (productivity grant in research and Universal Call for Papers), by FAPERJ (Scientist from Our State), and by UERJ's Prociência Program.



<sup>2</sup>During the “Learning expectations and PNE” seminar, groups in the education area gathered and concluded that “adopting a notion such as learning expectations reinforces performance and competence notions adopted since the Fernando Henrique Cardoso government, which establish a management principle strictly functional and pragmatic between government and civil society, whose regulation is established by defining measurable targets that should lead to mechanisms for accounting and for encouraging comparisons and competitions among schools” ([http://www.cedes.unicamp.br/Expectativas\\_de\\_Aprendizagem.pdf](http://www.cedes.unicamp.br/Expectativas_de_Aprendizagem.pdf)).

<sup>3</sup>In curricular theory, many other signifiers have been used for centralized control of curricula (Macedo, 2012, 2013a).

<sup>4</sup>The author quotes documents from the following countries as having made part of the analytical corpus: Australia, Cuba, Chile, the United States, Finland, Portugal, Mexico, Neo Zealand. However, some of these experiences gained importance in the presentations, Presentation viewed on July 25, 2015 on the MEC site: [www.portal.mec.gov.br](http://www.portal.mec.gov.br)

<sup>5</sup>Refer to the review of this book in this dossier.

<sup>6</sup>Site Movimento pela Base Comum Nacional, access on July 25, 2015 on <http://basenacionalcomum.org.br/por-que-criar-uma-base-comum-brasil/>

<sup>7</sup>Speech of the Brazilian Secretary Rentato Janine Ribeiro, on July 25, 2015 on [http://portal.mec.gov.br/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=21404:ministro-defende-base-comum-curricular-como-prioridade&catid=211](http://portal.mec.gov.br/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=21404:ministro-defende-base-comum-curricular-como-prioridade&catid=211)

<sup>8</sup>Article available on The Guardian, access on July 25, 2015 on <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/10/christopher-pyne-curriculum-must-focus-on-anzac-day-and-western-history>

<sup>9</sup>Idem.

<sup>10</sup><http://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum/curriculum.html>

<sup>11</sup>Automated schemes, a type of practical unconscious in Piaget’s terms, would approach the concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1972).

<sup>12</sup>In this case, refer to document Curricular Questioning (MEC, 2009) that I analyze elsewhere (Macedo, 2012).

<sup>13</sup>We are aware that the National Education Plan, as the LDB before, advocate the existence of such bases. We have written them twice with the name of national curricular guidelines, which seems to be more than what is necessary to us.

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