

Between curriculum reforms and pedagogical practices: Ursula Hoadley and the “pedagogy in poverty”

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Abstract

In this interview, Ursula Hoadley, a professor and researcher at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, discusses some of the ideas present in her book *Pedagogy in Poverty: lessons from twenty years of curriculum reform in South Africa*. The author highlights the explanatory power of Basil Bernstein’s theoretical framework, her main reference both in this and other investigations in the South-African context. The interviewee comments on her main findings in this research, which allowed her to describe and analyze teaching practices developed in the primary years of Elementary School – comprising a twenty-year period with intense curriculum reforms, in the context before and after the apartheid. While bearing the specificities of her country in mind, her considerations locate the aforementioned reforms in the wider context of developing countries – thereby becoming especially relevant to the debates about school curriculum in Brazil.

Keywords

Curriculum reforms – Teaching practices – School education.

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Introduction

In the early 1970s, the New Sociology of Education (NSE) within the European context, as well as the movement for the reconceptualisation of the curriculum in the United States, brought forth important changes in the field of education. Such changes involved new ways of discussing the potential and the limits of school in generating transformations both in social and individual trajectories. With

regard specifically to the curriculum, the authors linked to the aforementioned movements – basing themselves on different theoretical conceptions and ways of investigation – brought up new questions and endeavored to raise new concerns. If since the first decade of the 20th century the curriculum had been associated almost exclusively with organizational aspects or the “how to do”, these researchers focus centrally on “what” is defined to be taught at school, and “why”. In summary, it can be said that their research queries drew on the mounting clarity about the political character of curricular choices.

Among the authors of the NSE is Basil Bernstein, a sociologist of education whose theoretical framework, developed over an extensive intellectual trajectory, focuses on the study of pedagogic communication. More specifically, Bernstein seeks to describe and analyse how the relations of power and control in force in society are reproduced not only by the content selected to be taught at schools – an aspect highlighted by the theory of cultural reproduction – but also by the specific form of communication established in the pedagogical relationship.

His theory constitutes one of the main references to a large number of researchers around the world (MOORE, 2006; MULLER, 2000; YOUNG, 2008, MORAIS; NEVES, 2001; MATON, 2006; WHEELAHAN, 2010; among others³). Within this group is Ursula Hoadley, a professor in the School of Education at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. In her book, published in 2018 and entitled *Pedagogy in Poverty: lessons from twenty years of curriculum reform in South Africa*, she articulates Bernstein's theory with other perspectives (DOWLING, 1998; PEDRO, 1981), with a view to describing and analyzing the teaching practices verified within the primary years of elementary school (the first segment of Fundamental School, in Brazil). In doing so, she addresses a twenty-year period of intense curriculum reforms in South Africa, comprising both pre- and post-apartheid contexts⁴.

In the following interview given to *Educação e Pesquisa*, the author discusses this scenario of South-African curriculum reforms, and how it is linked to a broader movement

3- Also in Brazil, one can find researchers who draw on Bernstein's ideas: Sampaio (1998), Mainardes and Stremel (2010), Marandino (2015), Coelho (2017), Galian (2011), among others.

4- Among the many other publications by the author, the following stand out: Hoadley (2006, 2012), Hoadley and Galant (2019), Muller and Hoadley (2019), Morgan, Hordern and Hoadley (2019).

of reforms carried out in “developing countries”. She addresses the Bernsteinian theoretical framework, pointing out its descriptive and analytical potential. And comments on the interesting concept of *zero pedagogy*, which she has consolidated along with Johan Muller based on the findings of their research studies carried out in the light of Bernstein’s theory. The interview illustrates the potential of this theory in developing analyses on curricular texts and teaching practices. Furthermore, it prompts us to think about possible similarities between the South-African and the Brazilian educational realities – bearing in mind, of course, the historical, social, and political specificities of the two countries.

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Interview

1. In 2018 you published the book *Pedagogy in poverty: Lessons from twenty years of curriculum reform in South Africa*, which addresses the pedagogy within South-African schools during the transition from apartheid to democracy. More specifically, you analyze the curricular reforms then undertaken, as well as their possible impacts on teachers’ practices. In general terms, what has changed in South-African curricular documents during this period? And what are the links between these changes and the broader political scenario?

The apartheid curriculum was a content-heavy, ‘traditional’ curriculum, that carried a lot of ideological baggage of a racist and oppressive system. So, the first post-apartheid curriculum was a radical departure from this – to an outcomes-based curriculum framework which stated learning in the most general and generic way, with a radical constructivist pedagogic regime proposed. Subjects were replaced with transdisciplinary learning areas and content was largely removed. The system, and teachers in particular, were wholly unprepared for the changes envisaged. Most notably, the statement of learning in terms of outcomes and broad competences left the majority of teachers without guidance on what to teach, when and for how long. After two short years of implementation the curriculum was reviewed. Over the next 11 years the curriculum was revised twice and entailed a gradual shift to a knowledge-based, or performance curriculum model, leading to the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in 2011. CAPS entailed detailed a return to a subject-based curriculum, clear content specification and strong controls over the sequence and pace of curriculum coverage. This was viewed in some quarters as a neoconservative shift back towards the traditional curriculum – given some structural similarities with the apartheid curriculum. Under the CAPS there has been gradual improvement in student achievement outcomes, albeit off a very low base.

2. Despite changes on the level of curricular prescriptions, your researches have been signaling the permanence of a pedagogy that, in your words, constitutes “a way of marking time, a memorization ritual”. How do you understand the strength of such pedagogy, which so intensely marks the constitution of pedagogic discourse in schools, especially those which receive the poorest students in South Africa?

This (communalizing) pedagogy is one that is common across developing country context, and consists of rote learning, collective chanting, and copywriting and drill. It is also characterised by exceptionally slow pacing, a very low level of cognitive complexity and little scope for the evaluation of individual learner productions and the matching of instruction to meet a range of abilities and needs. There are different ways of understanding the persistence of this pedagogy in the literature. Some researchers relate it to cultural, and especially religious and missionary practices that have influenced the nature of classroom interaction, so the pedagogy is described as ritualized or catechetic – call and response. Others have attributed the ritual as a means of control, especially

for teachers in large classes with minimal resources. Having the class chant in unison in response to the teacher ensures that everyone is participating in the same way at the same time. A further explanation is that this kind of collective chanting masks a lack of knowledge on the part of the teacher and learner. The class and the teacher enter into an implicit contract that hides the lack of real transmission of understanding. I would say that there are elements of truth in all these explanations. Certainly, the pedagogy has cultural inflections, an understanding of learning derived from religious activity and the reproduction of scripture. But the accounts that emphasise control and a lack of knowledge on the part of teachers and students is a convincing account of why this pedagogy has persisted. But also, I think over time the form has become ritualized with nothing that makes sense to the teacher in her particular context being offered to dislodge it.

3. In the aforementioned book, you trace a comprehensive overview of curricular reforms recently carried out in a set of developing countries. In so doing, you highlight some common aspects of such processes, without losing sight of the specificities of each context. Which are, within this overview, the common features that most attracted your attention? And how did they contribute to the analyses of the results from the South-African case research?

In looking at the literature on curriculum and pedagogic forms across developing country contexts, there was remarkable similarity across different contexts in the kinds of curriculum reforms that have been undertaken. The first trend I identify in my book is reforms throughout the 1990s and early 2000s focused on the promotion of learner-centred (or child or student-centred) pedagogies, constructivist methods and curricula. Emphasis was placed on relevance and the inclusion of local knowledge and ways of understanding and there was a push towards integrated curricula and thematic approaches. These were strongly supported by international NGOs and donor organizations (including World Bank and UNESCO). The progressive aspects of these reforms remained popular until more recently, especially as they often articulated with political agendas in developing countries: it was assumed (and asserted) that to be politically progressive meant to be educationally progressive, and to question the one was to question the other. This idea was difficult to dislodge in post-colonial settings. A number of reviews have shown the ineffectiveness of these forms despite their persistent assertion. The form I alluded to above – the collectivized pedagogic form, characterized by rote learning and collective chanting – has remained the dominant form of pedagogy in these contexts.

The other reform trend has been towards competence-based curricula which seem to have had two rounds (and are recycled on an on-going basis). The first was the adoption of outcomes-based systems, sometimes linked to national qualification frameworks. Integration was high on the agenda with ‘thematic curriculum’ adopted in a number of countries. The second round has been more recent and focuses on competence-based frameworks and an emphasis on 21st century skills. This entails a redirection of the curriculum in terms of generic specification of a range of skills. This second wave has not entirely dislodged subject-based curricula but does pose a threat to the prioritizing of knowledge in curriculum. What

both these generic outcomes forms of curriculum do is background subject knowledge. They depend centrally on the quality of the teachers – their content knowledge, their facility with different teaching methods and their access to appropriate teaching materials. When generic skills replace formal knowledge, the rules of the schooling game are hidden from those teachers and learners most needing to access them.

4. Your research trajectory draws on Basil Bernstein as a main theoretical reference. Why is his conceptual framework helpful to the development of your studies? And how do you articulate it with other references, such as Paul Dowling and Pedro Demo?

There are a number of reasons that Bernstein’s theory appeals to me in the kinds of questions I am interested in relation to curriculum and pedagogy. The first is that it offers a precise and delicate theorizing of educational processes that allows for an ‘anatomizing’ of pedagogy and a broad understanding of dominant curriculum forms. It also allows one to connect these forms to their social logics and their social implications. In other words, what are the implications of these forms for the social reproduction of inequalities, and their possible interruption. Secondly, it is one of the few theories of curriculum that places knowledge and its interrogation at the center of the theory. While much curriculum theory focuses on issues of identity and representation, Bernstein’s theory connects these aspects to forms of knowledge and their transmission.

5. While analyzing the dynamics between *knowledge*, *curriculum*, and *pedagogy* over time, you draw on the stimulating image of teachers’ “cognitive horizons”, stating that “no reform is likely to succeed without a significant shift in the cognitive horizons of those teaching in our schools”. Broadly speaking, what does this image entail? And how do these “cognitive horizons” articulate the curricular enhancement and the shift in entrenched classroom practices within schools?

It is a widely accepted maxim in education to say that teachers teach the way they were taught. This has implications for the way in which education, and pedagogy specifically, reproduces social inequalities. In highly stratified systems, such as that of South Africa (and I think Brazil too), teachers enter teaching without ready access to different ways of approaching pedagogy and their professional socialization is generally too weak to disrupt the twelve years of apprenticeship into teaching that teachers received through their own schooling. The idea of cognitive horizons suggests a broadening of teachers’ repertoires, a kind of learning about teaching in relation to their own context, particular learners and pedagogic demands that goes beyond what they know and often has not worked. It is cognitive because it refers to particular understandings of how teachers make sense of what they do.

6. To conclude this interview, we would like you to discuss the concept of “zero pedagogy”. “Zero framing” is a category developed by you and Johan Muller. It empirically describes the pedagogic communication, referring to a certain form of

control established in the relation between teachers and learners. We understand that this category is related to an aspect pointed out by Bernstein: in certain conditions, the pedagogic discourse can be reduced only to the *regulative* discourse, being thus diluted as to its *instructional* dimension. These ideas seem to be quite powerful in supporting research around teacher practices within developing countries, such as Brazil. They offer, thus, an inspiring way to finalize our talk.

I will give you the long answer to this question. The notion of ‘zero pedagogy’ emerged from research I conducted where I found an absence of evaluative criteria in the instructional discourse of the classrooms that I had observed. Although all the outward forms of pedagogic practice were evident (regulative discourse) there was no evidence of criteria being transmitted. I thus suggested a possible zero coding for framing over the criterial rules in the classroom, where the pedagogy is neither weakly nor strongly framed. The question I asked was if in a pedagogic encounter there is no evidence of learning or intended or actual change in the learner, then is this pedagogy? Hugo and Wedekind⁵ picked up on the discussion arguing that absence of instructional discourse in pedagogy translates to the absence of pedagogy or ‘zero pedagogy’ (their term). They pick up on my zero ascription to evaluation and generalized it to pedagogy as a whole. They don’t attend to the distinction between instructional and regulative discourse, and so the zero is applied to the social relations, norms etcetera.

Zipin’s⁶ enters the debate and his concern in his critique of Hugo and Wedekind is the way in which they mobilize my argument to make widespread claims about pedagogy. He is correct that my claims are limited to the evaluative criteria, and I resist making generalizations on the basis of a single case. But Zipin is most concerned with Hugo and Wedekind’s and my privileging of specialized knowledge in the pedagogic relation over everyday knowledge. He identifies privileging of specialized knowledge as a ‘Euro-cultural imperialism’ suppressing debate around *whose* knowledge is represented. Zipin is talking about regulative discourse. He is pointing to the need to affirm the cultural background of learners and take heed of the socio-ethical purposes of teaching. But this focus should not displace the need for children, especially children from disadvantaged backgrounds, to be given access to formal specialized school knowledge. Everyday knowledge and specialized knowledge should be seen relationally rather than dichotomously, and given the school context, the endpoint is crucially about the later I would argue. The debate is centrally about the ordering principles of pedagogy – specialization or deep everyday knowledge of a community.

The proliferation of everyday knowledge to the exclusion of specialized, codified knowledge is one that has long characterized the South Africa and many other developing country contexts, often deriving from ‘learner-centred’ curriculum reforms. In South Africa the absence of evaluative rules denotes a fundamental pedagogic breakdown, which has its roots

5- HUGO, Wayne; WEDEKIND, Volker. Six failures of the pedagogic imagination. *Southern African Review of Education*, v. 19, n. 1, p. 139-158, 2013 e HUGO, Wayne; WEDEKIND, Volke. Ordering principles and operating principles of pedagogy: a reply to Zipin, *Southern African Review of Education*, v. 19, n. 1, p. 167-176, 2013.

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in a failed system, a historical impoverishment of what schooling entails under apartheid, a poorly prepared teaching force and a lack of clear professional parameters guiding practice. These are not about accumulated cultures, home community or otherwise, but about exclusion from induction into a culture of schooling that leads to learning. The question for me is how we think about this regulative discourse in relation to instructional discourse, and how we work to understand everyday knowledge as providing a conduit to specialized knowledge in particular contexts.

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