

## INTRODUCTION

### CURRICULUM POLICIES OR COMMON CORE: DISCUSSIONS AND TENSIONS

Throughout the recent debate for the development of the National Education Plan, the discussion about a national common base for curricula resurfaced. It is true that the topic was never completely forgotten by curricular policies. Now, it is argued that the aforementioned base is required by the Bases and Guidelines Law, of 1996, or even that the 1988 Constitution, article 210, already provided for it<sup>1</sup>. The National Education Plan would be, then, the latest legislation to mention the mandatory nature of a national common base for the curricula. Not arguing how far the interpretation that such legislations require that the public power defines that which will be taught in classrooms throughout Brazil is correct, we understand that the current discussion is marked by an inconclusive debate regarding the curriculum. Therefore we also consider it relevant to understand both the arguments of those who are against curricula being centralized, and the different voices in favor of national curricula. If this latest position is less visible in texts that make up this dossier, this is not because we so desire, but rather because colleagues who defend it could not or did not want, midway through the process, submit their contributions. We did not have the time to make new invitations, but we are sure that, considering the academic treatment given to the topic by the authors published herein, multiple voices echo in each one of them.

Deciding which knowledge is the most valid was, for a long time, one of the main issues in the curriculum field. If some still defend this centralization, they certainly do not do it while holding the certainty that there is a single answer, or that such answer hovers above power relations. Originally formulated by Spencer, it was given a scientific and little critical treatment by him. At the peak of the Enlightenment, Spencer<sup>2</sup> pointed at science as the “uniform answer” and “comparatively simple” to the question that seemed “so complex”. Spencer’s common curricular base - which was not at all national, similarly to the one we have been discussing in Brazil - was consistent with the positivistic promise that the right to education, restricted to privileged groups before, would now be universal. This is, still, the same promise we hear today, as we are aware that Spencer’s answer did not ensure the right to education, or quality education, for all. For some, just because we have never implemented it, for others, because there is no neutral knowledge. Both emphasize that there are power

relations that may no be forgotten when we think about answers, or even when we formulate the answer as the one to be answered.

Young<sup>3</sup>, by analyzing how critical theory unfolded in England, and with fewer details, in the USA, argues that the concern with knowledge was abandoned, which would have led to the curricular theory loosing its importance. Not discussing whether Young's reading is valid for the context to which it refers, we argue that it is not possible to transpose it to Brazil. On the other hand, Marxist thought has produced, in the field of curricula, in the country, a strong epistemological discussion that has also reached the curricular practice. The impact of historical-critical pedagogy on curricular policies, for instance, may be felt in the majority of the curricular guidelines in the country, since the 80's. The curriculum that highlight the importance of socially accumulated knowledge are at least part of that which shall be taught in schools. If the question on the most valid knowledge to be taught was not abandoned, the answer has become much more complex. After decades of critical thought in the curriculum field, any common base for the curriculum becomes, at least, the result of a selection that meets, invariably, certain interests.

Post-structural thought that, according to Young and Muller<sup>4</sup> arguments has accelerated curricular theory's turn towards relativism, has been another important reference when it is about problematizing the idea of national curricula. On the one had, the questioning of master identities - whether they are class, national identity or global citizen identity - could make the cultural repertoire available for selecting the most valid knowledges, that the task could become unfeasible. On the other hand, the very idea of knowledge as something external to the subject, which he mobilizes to meet this or that purpose seems to be a little naive ever since Foucault related knowledge and power in an inextricable manner. In this sense, post-structural thought, rather than relativist, criticizes modernity's universal fiction. I would distrust not only the possibility to answer Spencer's questions, but the very possibility of asking such question. As Silva<sup>5</sup> (1999), reminds us, still in the 90's curricula are implied in government strategies and subject production, and produces meanings in a creative practice marked by power.

The current discussion about a common base on national level for the curriculum mobilizes this entire history, displacing it in time and space - or making these other discourses more hybrid, which is all the same - to produce arguments in defense or contrary to curricular centralization. On the other hand, in the connected world where

we live, also marked by global experiences for [impossible] control of representation forms, international experiences also inexorably mark our debate. The desire to control curricula on a national level does not only manifest itself in Brazil. Ever since the 90's, with what we criticized at the time as neo-liberal practices, governments have perfected centralized evaluation mechanisms so much as the most direct curricula control, justifying them for their alleged low level of teacher's education and qualification. Even if, for instance, in Brazil, there have been, in the past years, several interventions in taking the university to areas where they did not exist, and in improving teacher qualification, the lack of quality argument keeps on justifying policies.

In Brazil, as well as abroad, this argument of lacking is mitigated by researches that show that a lot of good things are done on the school floor. Although little visibility is given them in the mass media, schools develop a series of very successful qualification experiences, and here we mean public schools [or not] but not "special" project schools, which are being advertised as the solution for schools or, at least, as "good ideas". Are these experiences compatible with a common national basis for the curriculum? The answer by some people has been that there is a diversified part and that the teacher will continue to be responsible for his/her class and will keep its autonomy to propose good experiences. It is not about doubting that, in practice, this possibility is being thought of, as part of the argumentation that defends the base is supported on the teachers lack of quality. More than this, we consider it is necessary to maintain the questions, broadening its meanings. What keeps some of us worried is whether the idea that the curriculum base is a set of [objective] knowledge to be taught to all is compatible with the proliferation of such experiences. Do we run the risk of the teacher no longer being educated and educating, but rather being taught and teaching?

A second set of researches has highlighted that interventions via curricular centralization do not provide good results. There are several other factors that are more relevant for improving education. The ranking produced by the Education and Culture Department (MEC) of school best student test performances indicate that we know the political answer to the quality problem. Well qualified teachers, dedicated to the institution, make the difference in schools that occupy the top positions in MEC's list. Better salaries, the research shows, attract better professionals, favor their updating and enable them to spend longer times in schools. As the experience in Finland, number 1 in the international ranking used to tell us

how awful our education is, shows us, the bet shall be placed on well qualified teachers. On the other hand, countries that could not hold the national curricula momentum in the 90's, as we did with the National Curricular Parameters (PCN) that have not been imposed as mandatory curricular guide thanks to the social movement and CNE (National Education Council) action have generated researches that show that the promised quality and equity is still a far away mirage.

We obviously cannot encompass, in an introductory text designed only to introduce this dossier, the complexity of researches that have, for many years, produced knowledge about the effects of curricular centralization in the subjects' education. However, we invite everyone to read the reflections of some researchers on curricular centralization on the different education levels. In Brazil, Rita de Cássia Prazeres Frangella analyses the National Pact for Literacy at the Right Age (PNAIC); Elizabeth Macedo is dedicated to the discourses on the national core curriculum for elementary school; Monica Ribeiro da Silva is dedicated to the Innovative Middle Schooling Program, and Maria Manuela Alves Garcia studies teacher qualification. We also bring the experience from colleagues in Argentina, Silvina Feeney and Daniel Feldman, and from Chile, Claudia Matus. We close the dossier with a review of Pasi Sahlberg's book on the Finnish experience (Finish Lessons 2.0), one of the best-sellers in the USA. written by Hugo Heleno Camino, We hope that what we saw when we researched at the University, with public funding, contributes for the definition of education public policies.

Elizabeth Macedo - UERJ

Rita de Cássia Prazeres Frangella - UERJ

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> <http://basenacionalcomum.mec.gov.br/#/site/base/por-que>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16510/16510-h/16510-h.htm>, access in January 2016, dated 1861.

<sup>3</sup> Young, Michael (2014). Overcoming the crisis in curriculum theory: knowledge-based approach. **Journal of Curriculum Studies**, 45(2), 101-118.

<sup>4</sup> Young, Michael and Muller, Johan (2007). Truth and truthfulness in the Sociology of Educational Knowledge. **Theory and Research in Education**, 5, p173-201.

<sup>5</sup> Silva, Tomaz Tadeu da. **O currículo como fetiche**. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 1999.