The curriculum practical construction: A local perspective from the research of school external evaluation system

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Abstract
In a time of globalization the discourses of standards and accountability (Taubman, 2009) are strongly predominant in the practical construction of curriculum of basic and secondary schools. The transnational curriculum theories and practices (Autio, 2014) and the character of a transcendent market logic (Smith, 2014) are constituting a pragmatic kind of globalization (Ball, 2012) centered on forms of homogenization of the curriculum by borrowing and lending policies (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012).

By reading the five introductory texts of the International handbook of curriculum research (Pinar, 2014a) we underline not only the global governmentality as a pragmatic project but also the local particularities. At the same time, we analyze the Portuguese curricular reality through a research project based on the schools external evaluation system to support the outputs and the outcomes, expressed on results and standards (Scott, 2014) due to one curricular approach centered on testing (Pacheco & Marques, 2013), as the accountability method to construct the curriculum practice. A critical perspective of this method is defined by the double interconnected movement internationalization and nationalization (Hua, Wenjun & Pinar, 2014). In spite the intended curriculum is apparently becoming more uniform around the world, what actually happens within schools varies widely around the world (Anderson-Levitt, 2009), it is relevant that the developing knowledge networks, enable policies to move through and adapt on other contexts (Ball, 2012).

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Introduction

Considering curriculum as a transdisciplinary subject that deserve a conscientious dialogue about its long term effects, we are confident that in Portugal the standardization of the curriculum can be supported by the schools external evaluation system.

This paper is a part of a Portuguese national study: “Impact and Effects of External School Evaluation on non-Higher Education Schools” - developed by six Portuguese universities (University of Minho, University of Porto, University of Vila Real, University of Lisbon, University of Évora and University of Algarve) with the objective of identify the
effects of the Portuguese school external evaluation system in school of non-higher education in Portugal. This project is funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology - FCT (PTDC/CPE-CED/116674/2010).

Based on the internationalization of curriculum and the Portuguese context, we aim to contribute to a local reflection that will contribute for the understanding of the effects of globalization in the curriculum.

The internationalization of curriculum studies

Currently the essence of curriculum debate is the resonance inflicted by the social effects of globalization which is promoting a “living in tensionality” state that feeds the dichotomy between the “curriculum-as-a-plan” and the “curriculum-as-a-lived-experiences” (Aoki, 2005, p. 159). Therefore the internationalization of the curriculum allows a reframing and decentralization of theories and practices happening in different places and traditions. For Pinar (2013, p. 65) “the labor of reconceptualization is the labor of rereferentialization, a process in which concepts from other disciplines, countries, cultural traditions and historical moments enable us to enunciate the present moment, itself simultaneously unprecedented and utterly familiar”, making possible a societal transformation caused by neoliberalism and neoconservatism tendencies, contrasting with the philosophical and political thinking as Smith (2014, pp.45-46) underlines: “global vacuum in both philosophy and politics is emerging from the exhaustion, even death, of this former "order", with no comprehensive global planning or strategizing possible under a condition now characterized as civilizational pluralistic (...)”.

The development of Market Logic “hypocritically operates with a deliberate but nonlinkage hidden between its promises and its deliveries” (Ibid, p.47), and it’s based on Hayek ideals, believing leadership should be attributed to the elite, has created a notion that democracy is a problem for those who sympathize with its ideals. The globalization process opened a gap between the individual and society (Autio, 2014), and changed relations between central power and peripheries, making room for an accountability system fed by globalization tendencies (Pinar, 2014a). Smith (2014, p.47) describes this process as “a bifurcation between winners and losers” which in the educational context could be interpreted as a distinction between successful and non-successful students, imposing a meritocracy system in schools and creating a framework for different level classes, segregating the non-main curriculum fitted students.

With the emergence of neoliberalism thinking the educational system neglected the result of the intellectual construction between thought, action and self-realization (Autio, 2014; Tröhler, 2014). This constructive approach is associated with the concept of Bildung, which is being replaced by a curriculum focused on an economy process leading to an educational experience subjugated by a pressure of “teaching to the test” (Autio, 2014, p. 18; Pacheco & Marques, 2013; Pinar, 2013, p. 4), focused on reaching a predetermined profile of success, supported by accountability and managerialism approaches. This conception of quality educational system emerges from quality assurance systems and shouldn’t be applied straightforward in educational systems (Autio, 2014) fostering actions mainly focused in “competition and accumulation (...) though collaboration, ever-increasing productivity, and above all technological innovation” (Pinar, 2013, p. 51). This superficial add-on attitude neglects the educational system specificities and inclusive philosophy leaving no child behind,
regardless its individual interests and competencies. That will allow curriculum, “the heart of education” (Wang, 2014, p. 72), to connect with all educational structures becoming closer to Bildung theory “a general theory of becoming human, with secularized theological connotations” (Ibid, p.18).

The reconfiguration of the dynamic concepts
The managerial policy discourse defends key concepts that promote social homogeneity (Seabra, et al, 2012) and it is characterized by a top-down system (OCDE, 2012) that tends normalize the scientific universalism (Autio, 2014). In a macro level, this situation causes some subjectivity and individuality issues, because of a goal minded thinking, making education more like a massive controlled laboratory of ideas and innovation, shrinking diversity and debate. Nowadays, especially in the Anglophone world, a Post-Standardization Era is emerging, but some difficulties are being identified as consequences of the neoliberal Era, namely a dominance of a top-down structure and a valorization of evidence-based approaches, and also the “implicit and structural distrust of teachers” (Ibid, p.19).

For Autio (2014, p. 20) “curriculum is always threaded through the subjectivity of the teacher”, suggesting that curriculum and education has been drastically deconstructed by the processes of globalization, bringing to schools “serious philosophical and practical challenges” (McCarthy, et al, 2014, p. 33). This multiplicity of effects is a reflection of the impact of neoliberalism causing an “emergence of the new Right and its distinctive fusion of the political and economic that integrates eighteenth- and nineteenth-century notions of free market and laissez-faire into potentially all aspects of contemporary life” (Ibid, p.36). The impact of the neoliberal mindset is reflected on teachers’ curricular decisions transferring a goal minded thinking into the curriculum, trying to reinforce a full knowledge approach that does not address the particular issues that young people have to face nowadays in such a complex and unpredictable context. Consequently curriculum as a plan is not an answer for contemporary world and another curricular approach must be forged, in which students play a more constructive and participative role establishing a curriculum as a lived experienced to face the uncertainty of today and near future challenges. This aspect is also present in the participation of social minorities in the construction of a curriculum that respects and address its singularities and deeply understands diversity and its value for the construction of the curriculum in its twin roles — preparing young people for work and citizenship (Ibid, p.42). Wang (2014) defends that it’s important to create space for an individual, local, global and international nonviolent curriculum which respects identity and relationship. A curriculum that promote democracy, justice and equality will vanish the nonviolence (physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, social and cultural) in the education field. That is the real challenge for the internationalization of curriculum studies.

Portuguese Curriculum and European Context
Pinar’s work is related, in last years, and interconnected through the curricular distinctive national context, identifying the intellectual histories and the present circumstances of the following countries: South Africa (Pinar, 2010), Mexico (Pinar 2011a), Brazil (2011b), United States (2013) and China (2014). The distinctiveness and dynamism of these countries had been explored in the context of the internationalization of the curricular studies field, considering
internationalization “also a series of localizations, as it requires its practitioners to devise
genealogies of present circumstances both internal and external to our fields of study and
expertise” (Pinar, 2011b).

When the curricular national and international contexts are considered, “the major
epistemological problem is how to design and conduct research on curriculum (be it national or
international) without being blindly trapped by one’s own cultural or national systems of
reasoning” (Thröler, 2014, p. 62) because “curriculum studies tend to be explicitly situated with
the national borders in which they are conducted” (Pinar, 2003, p. 2). As a process of creation of
hegemonies, globalization is a phenomenon that can be placed in distinct levels, mainly in the
economic and social ones, therefore altering power relationships and decisions significantly in
transnational, supranational, national and local levels, imposing new logics of conceptualising,
only education and training, but also organisations themselves and, consequently, their role,
as Pinar (2013, p. 6) recognizes that “the present circumstances of almost every academic field
is simultaneously national, regional, and global”.

Whereas at a discursive level the concepts of local identity, decentralisation and
autonomy become vital, the uniformity of educative institutions is still a reality. It is, therefore,
imperative to accept that the State will keep on insisting “on the uniformity of practices, values,
knowledge and orientations” (Kress, 2003, p. 120) and on the fulfilment of a globalised
educational agenda that originates the debate about the role of the State (a protagonist or a
reduced character?).

In the specific case of Portugal (Pacheco & Seabra, 2014), globalization has functioned,
besides the aspects which are common to all countries, through the European Union whose
member states nowadays have a common policy. It is thus predictable that its effects on national
policies tend to homogeneity and uniformity rather than to diversity and multiplicity. It is as
Wächtcher (2004 p. 268) claims, the alteration of the dominant paradigm – from diversity to
convergence. In this sense, the national is a new category-in-change, running towards a
common structure about a global culture of schooling. For Spring (2008, p. 332), “the
nation-state does not disappear but becomes a subset of societies”.

The Europeanization of curriculum is more visible at the peripheral countries, such as
Portugal because their integration on the European Union has been accompanied by an
overwhelming investment on the adoption of policies and practices of education and training, in
the scope of the convergence policies. Naturally, curriculum has an essential role in this process,
which in turn leads to the resignification of its organization, contents and assessment.

In terms of assessment, the concept of curriculum has been oriented toward learning
outcomes, rather than learning processes, oriented to employability and usefulness. From
elementary school to higher education, a culture of evaluation has been implemented, aiming at
attaining better results in the comparative studies held at an international level, as well as in the
qualification of the workforce, tending to the “process of commodification of knowledge”
(Pang, 2006, p.7).

This commodification materializes in three main aspects: firstly, in a shift from a
curricular organization based on objectives to one based on learning outcomes and
competencies, with an emphasis in the individualization of knowledge and on the employability
of the citizens; secondly in the valuing of the technological areas in higher education, which are
understood in a strict relation to enterprises and practical/economical uses of knowledge; and
thirdly, on elementary and secondary schools, in the emergence of a ‘new trivium’, consisting in the valuing of maths and sciences, English as the second first language and Communication and Information Technologies. We add one more aspect: the curriculum control over external evaluation.

The empirical research ongoing in Portugal (Pacheco, et al, 2014) about school external evaluation recognizes the effects of external evaluation both on school’s practices and teachers’ discourses, enlightening the tension between national homogeneity and the school and teacher autonomy. In effect, the external evaluation is a powerfully instrument of curriculum control, expressing the idea of quality by learning outcomes and standards, as stresses (Ball, 2012) and “teaching to the test” (Autilo, 2014, p. 18; Pacheco & Marques, 2013; Taubman, 2009).

External evaluation can be seen as specific control of curriculum or a moving control based on learning results and curricular standards. Its focus in on that flows within schools, affecting the curricular teacher work.

Conclusion

Internationalization is a paradigmatic change influenced by a critical analysis of the globalization process, on one hand and on the other is also influenced by the curriculum, contesting policies and practices associated with accountability processes, turning schools’ value measurable.

Internationalization becomes an intellectual movement redesigning concepts linked to education and curriculum, rejecting the imposing of universal norms, defending the recognition of subjectivity and individuality in a non-violence context.

Portuguese curriculum reality is analyzed regarding the European context which is integrated in a transnational context of borrowing and lending policies that tend to standardize education and school (Steiner-Khansri, 2012). In spite of this control, Portuguese curriculum reality has been influenced by external evaluation of schools.

The empirical research shows that external evaluation of schools is raising practices and mindsets of accountability both on schools and teachers.

Notes

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References


