Observations of School Culture: From Theorists to Curriculum Issues

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Abstract

In recent years, we have developed research studies to analyze the relationships between the fields of history and sociology of curriculum, school, and culture. Using previously conducted studies, we investigate topics such as school culture and education management, which broaden our understanding of education, school days and spaces, classes and courses of study, and interchanges and their effects on new generations.

Keywords: schol, culture, school culture, curriculum, history of curriculum, sociology of curriculum, theorists

1. Introductory Remarks

In recent years, we have developed research studies to analyze the relationships between the fields of history and sociology of curriculum, school, and culture. Using previously conducted studies, we investigate topics such as school culture and education management, which broaden our understanding of education, school days and spaces, classes and courses of study, and interchanges and their effects on new generations.

We focus on studies that refer to cultural and curriculum history, including the work of Goodson (1997 and 1999), Viñao-Frago (1997, 1998, and 2000), Certeau (1998) Elias (1994), Ginzburg (1987), and Eagleton (2003). Additionally, we incorporate research on cultural and curriculum sociology based on the studies of Williams (1969 and 1994), Bourdieu (1982, 1989, 1997, 1998, 2004, 2007, and 2008), Bernstein (1996, 1997, and 1998), Forquin (1998), Apple (1982 and 2005), Dubet (2005), and Lahire (1997, 2004, and 2002).

To establish the theoretical and methodological context of this article, we summarized the work of Hobsbawm, Certeau, Ginzburg, and Magalhães in the field of history and that of Bourdieu and Bernstein in the field of sociology. (Note 1)

Furthermore, this analytical framework is founded on the understanding of curriculum as a territory organized by regulations, guidelines, and professional and learning interests based on a global assumption of educational work, curriculum differentiation and flexibility, and the integration of educational activities.

2. Concepts and Policies in the Field of Curriculum History Based on the Work of Hobsbawm, Certeau, Ginzburg, and Magalhães

Based on curriculum history, the research studies under development ultimately strive to reconstruct the history of the institution through a unique approach. The approach begins with reviewing documents and establishing relationships and correlations to rebuild a network of meanings of school culture. The next step is to reread each document in an attempt to reconstruct the curriculum routine. The starting point is the idea that this routine is complex and diffuse, and it is difficult to understand and unveil what was/is hidden and ascertained.

By attempting this reconstruction, we uphold the tension between macrosocial aspects and school microdimensions in which the curriculum takes shape. Therefore, we reduce the current analysis to one of those aspects, i.e., the material culture to depict curriculum as a forum for the formalization and strengthening of identities. This reduction/understanding is based on the meaning that societies and specifically schools assign to objects, documents, and artifacts, which we have identified through indicators that express the multiple experiences of the production, reproduction, and appropriation of cultures.

We have used Ginzburg's *indiciary paradigm* (1987) for such an identification because it facilitates a historiographical process of "hunting," i.e., seeking and deciphering "clues," which are perhaps irrelevant at first

glance but enable the analysis of complex realities that are otherwise incomprehensible. It is crucial to locate the universal in the singular because singularity is the starting point.

Therefore, we consider the curriculum an educational asset in the analysis of this singularity because it broadens the understanding of educational institutions regarding possible interpretations of educational materials. Furthermore, this approach ultimately contributes to a thorough understanding of scientific-pedagogical realities and educational contexts.

Such broadening has led us to study the history of educational institutions by seeking to understand the school and to integrate it into the history of education as a complex internality that influences reality and is influenced by it through standardization and the inheritance of norms and attitudes. Accordingly, Magalhães (2004) distinguishes two common orientations in the historiography of education based on a school: first, the history of relationships between school and society, their social roles, influences, and regulations and second, the history of a school in its singularity, characteristics, and internal relationships and practices. Hence, the history of a school as a historical construction, the product of a multifactorial process is founded in two paradigms: one essentially external paradigm and another internal paradigm.

Notably, this interior paradigm is also influenced by the management and adaptation of spaces and structures, the cycles of demand for education and the renewal of human and material resources, the recruitment and training policies of the teaching staff, and the policies of admission and of student body success. These facts, events, and combinations must not only be equally included in the preparation of the discourse to integrate and question the historical overview but must also represent key information factors and means of structuring research (Cf. Magalhães, 2004).

Thus, to consider the objects, documents, and artifacts as sources and materials for reconstructing the curriculum history and specifically the school's history, we compare two basic elements: form and function. With regard to form, we compare forms that allow comprehension of the most basic objects' generality or particularities. With regard to function, we compare the use of objects in their cultural, academic, and disciplinary contexts.

From this perspective, we include the proposal by Certeau for writing history:

> In history, everything begins with the act of separating, gathering, and transforming certain objects that are differently distributed into 'documents.' This new cultural distribution is the first step. Indeed, this step consists of producing such documents simply by recopying, transcribing, or photographing these objects while simultaneously changing their place and status (Certeau, 2000, p. 81).

In this process of "brushing history backwards" to "read the testimonials in reverse," one must remember that "every point of view about reality, in addition to being inherently selective and biased, depends on power relations that determine the image society gives of itself, through the possibility of accessing documentation" (Certeau, 2000, p. 43).

Based on the work of Certeau and Ginzburg, we strive to meet the curriculum particularities of a school without losing sight of the entire history, which is an idea based on the work of Hobsbawm (1994), for whom historical knowledge is a singular aspect of human knowledge that is inherently variable and always temporary.

Accordingly, historians must begin from the following point: the utterly central and fundamental distinction between verifiable fact and fiction between historical statements that are based on evidence and subject to disclosure and those that are not.

We are engaged in finding this distinction through the practical implications of schools' material culture. Precisely within these implications lies the demand for further singularity of this research category due to its associations with anthropology, museology, archeology, and unquestionably with history in its various fields and focuses (from the history of mentalities to microhistory, from everyday life to social history, and from life histories to cultural history).

The cultural contents of the objects, documents, and artifacts of the current research are interpreted as use/function contexts, not as production contexts, which we believe are contained within the selection of these contents. For this purpose, the opposition between history and function leads us directly to the interests expressed in the material classifications. On the one hand, objects are classified or understood as indicators of evolution and thus indicate the position of a society on one or more evolutionary scales. On the other hand, the objects can be classified depending on their social function in a given society:

> In the current society, the historical object is characterized, whatever its intrinsic attributes may be, by the prior and invariable meaning that pervades it, which is derived not from these attributes but from the external contamination with any transcendental reality (Cf. Meneses, 1998).

The discussion of the status of the object is particularly critical for reconstructing the curriculum history and the analysis of the material culture. The object, designed according to the classic paradigm of research, represents something that exists independently of individuals. In this respect, the object is culturally neutral. The object can be perceived as non-neutral in ideological or cultural terms. Therefore, the object updates and reflects cultural contents and thus exists only in relation to individuals:

> Only objects transcend the space and time frontier. This materiality is characterized by permanence but not immobility. The objects' "traveler" facet is known. The objects circulate within human societies, and therefore, one object can acquire different meanings in more than one context or place (Nogueira, 2002).

Finally, as curriculum objects are timeless, it is possible to re-experience them and even profile the professional activity that created this object and the teaching staff that materialized the object.

3. Concepts and Policies in the Fields of Curriculum Sociology and Culture Based on the Work of Bourdieu and Bernstein

Understanding curriculum problems within the limits of this research field implies understanding the relationship the field maintains with schools and the pedagogical discourse of differences that describe and interpret the schools' practices as translations of school culture. Such translations have been used in the identification and relevance of both the macrosociological analysis of social dynamics, the structuring processes of these dynamics, and in the phenomena of the allocation and circulation of meanings to the understanding of social and microsociological processes.

For this purpose, we reject any deterministic, mechanistic, and aprioristic positioning in the equation of structural relationships between social agents, resulting in the subordination of the fields to the field of economic production. Therefore, we have sought to formally examine and reveal within national and local curriculum documents, with the school revealed through them, the union of all social classes and to locate the social processes responsible for maintaining inequalities in educational success; i.e., we have sought to understand the output of that which is "excluded from the inside" of the system.

According to Bernstein, a school should ensure three rights to fulfill its role: the first right addresses personal development and training and operates at an individual level; the second right, which operates at a social level, concerns the right to be included, which is different from being absorbed because it encompasses the concept of autonomy; the third right, which operates at a political level, is the right to participation, which includes the opportunity to participate in the development, maintenance, or change in the social order.

Given the analyses of the context of everyone's formal access to the same education using an official curriculum, we began to question the relationship that different social classes establish with school and the knowledge delivered by school. In this regard, granting equal access to the system clearly represents a necessary but by no means sufficient condition for success in achieving the cultural privilege that schools intend to provide to all citizens, including those with disabilities.

Social status affects people's living conditions, paths, strategies, opportunities, risks, practices, lifestyles, perceptions, communication, and behavior. Education is the only field in which the relationship between social class and the experiences and results obtained, the objective conditions with the subjective measures, is clear.

Accordingly, we use the theory of symbolic violence to predict that through the proposal of changes to the conditions of access, dissemination, and distribution of knowledge, curriculum documents are objective instruments of symbolic violence because they impose themselves by an arbitrary power as a cultural arbitrary principle.

This process requires the development of pedagogical work as indoctrination work, i.e., a *habitus* as the internalization product of cultural arbitrary principles; thus, the practice perpetuates in the practices and in the principles of the internalized arbitrary element. However, the notion instilled by an arbitrary power for the need to reorganize the knowledge distribution practices of the cultural arbitrary principle relative to an innovative curriculum will yield a *habitus* that will perpetuate itself in the internalized arbitrary attitudes.

An example of this analysis has been found in certain curriculum document formats that we have analyzed. These documents establish that everyone, regardless of their backgrounds and life experiences, must be offered

the same paths so that they reach the same objectives, and the documents reflect uniform responses structured in knowledge that is considered universal.

Curricula organized in this theoretical-ideological framework would provide all students the same curricular paths, methods, and materials through an approach of homogenization and assimilation.

> All cultural arbitrators entail, in effect, a social definition of the legitimate way of imposing the culture arbitrarily and in particular the degree to which the arbitrary power that enables the Pedagogical Authority may develop as such without annihilating the Educational Authority's own effect. (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1992, p.30).

Such an internalized arbitrary element is supported by the pressures of maintaining the "national common ground" as opposed to the relationships established with knowledge from a given system of allocation of values. These values express local needs that are deeply determined by political choices that obey extremely different logics of power. A curricular proposition appears to emerge through such logic and is grounded in ideals, thereby suggesting a close link between education and economy, which ultimately defines valid knowledge.

Given this framework, the interpretation of relationships between local curriculum and power demand further consideration beyond the regulators (Department of Education) and other ideological frameworks delineated for education systems that face individual demands and have economic, social, and above all cultural specificities. Such consideration is important for understanding how decision-making processes are developed in several institutions and through social dynamics.

Therefore, the changes suggested by local curriculum documents understandably may not lead to significant advances in the educational process, and the changes will be recontextualized within the school's curriculum practices. This analysis is supported by the concept of serving the administrative bureaucracy, by omitting any proposal or record in the initial or ongoing training of active-duty teachers, as well as by working conditions, available resources to develop practices, and even by expertise and knowledge that are accumulated.

The pedagogical discourse/recontextualizing principal takes possession of time, the selected texts, and the school space: time acquires a specialized reference, the age groups; the selected curriculum texts become the school curriculum, and the space becomes a context of communicative interactions defined by classification and framework values.

The theoretical bases supporting these discourses may not be different from those that help maintain the framework of the exclusion of interior processes (Bourdieu, 1998) experienced in daily school life. Therefore, nothing is mentioned about the students' social, cultural, and geographical conditions inhabiting these curriculum documents, and this gap gives the impression of a school culture's reform whose virtue is based on the allure of a symbolic language that seems incomprehensible.

Schools are institutions that comply with collective traditions, which have certain human purposes and are products of social and economic ideologies. Curricula respond to the purposes of schools as they respond to the needs of a certain social control through relatively standardized interactions of transmitted knowledge, which is regarded as normative by most educators.

However, this standardization, which is valid as a reference for the critical analysis of a reformist discourse on the role of knowledge and consequently of school, proliferates in local documents. This analysis brings us to the first stage of unveiling the attitudes that advocate the neutrality of curricular measures and justify the technical actions that define the essence of education designed by such documents. Founded on the assumptions of Bernstein (1996), this unveiling leads us to question how schools address external hierarchies and issues of social order, justice, and conflict. Moreover, we question how the schools disconnect the internal hierarchies of success from the external hierarchies of differences among social classes, which is a disconnection explained by the elaboration of a mythological discourse that incorporates social and political interests permeating social life.

Such discourse consists of two pairs of elements that merge and reinforce each other, namely, the **myth of national consciousness**, which is built by the school as something distinct from the myth of origin, success, and destination (school culture includes celebrations, rituals, and discourses in its language and teaching to form and preserve the myth), and the **myth of society** as an organism in which all activities have crucial functions and equivalents; such a myth implicitly justifies and maintains differences but not openly because the associations of differences (from the perspective of the current study) are presented as a result of biological differences.

Such myths describe the processes of pedagogical communication and demonstrate how curricula can operate within schools; thus, the myths explain how differences in student performance are related to social structure and the way in which these hierarchies fall or are constituent elements of the pedagogic apparatus.

4. Final Remarks

We have considered the relationship between the school and the curriculum in different forms. Such forms are created when different fields, authors, and dialogues intersect, which has allowed us to recognize the issues in those relationships. Our understanding is based on the historicization and denunciation of how schools and knowledge function in a capitalist society and on the roles of culture, visible and invisible pedagogies, and their various accomplishments as agencies and agents of production in a given context.

Thus, the current historicization of school, culture, and curriculum investigates a field that education historians have not been inclined to search: school contents, materials and teaching methods, study plans, spaces and school schedules. Thus, this historicization seeks clues and traces in the schools' internal processes and everyday life to analyze the complex relationships between such schools and society. This analysis delineates how schools both produce and reproduce societal definitions of culturally valid knowledge.

This field of study begins to establish a new paradigm for current research with the goal of rewriting the history of education and shaping an agenda that unites historical and cultural-historical studies with the history of knowledge. In other words, we seek a curriculum history based on what we understand as its two pairs of elements, i.e., the reflection and action of subjects that investigate and the object being investigated. Furthermore, we theorize regarding the curriculum from the perspective of its multiple interpretational frameworks.

With respect to the sociologies of school, culture, and curriculum, we have found extremely political and/or controversial versions of their relationships, that is, the production conditions of curricular differentiation and flexibility.

Such conditions are developed in curriculum documents that nonetheless express a dogmatic vision and a defense of education for all and education for some. This education is designed by the pace of distribution, classification, and framework and is established by predesigned and entirely segregating dynamics. In other words, the documents express how to operate in a new order, i.e., a 'new' and 'inclusive' education system that imposes new forms of centrality.

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Notes

Note 1. The field [of study] is the space in which relationships occur among individuals, groups and social structures; a space that is always dynamic and with a momentum that obeys its own laws, ever animated by inner disputes; and a field whose motive is invariably to foster the success of the relationships established among its components (whether at the level of agents or at the level of structures).