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Theorizing the curriculum

Alfredo Furlán¹ National Autonomous University of Mexico, Mexico

Julio U. Rios² National Autonomous University of Mexico, Mexico

Introduction

The disease of our time is undoubtedly the neoliberal rationality, which has been strongly implanted in the contemporary culture and invests new subjects at least among the officials and experts who dictate policies in the education sector. Although neoliberalism encompasses many levels of culture, this paper refers exclusively to the scope it has in the educational field and specifically in the area of the curriculum.

The neoliberal vision conveys an image of social reality as the sum of individuals competing with each other to belong to the sector of the winners and thus avoid falling into the group of losers. Winners will have access to available material and symbolic goods, while losers will be totally excluded or will have less access to them, at least within societies that have been run on social-democratic criteria and have been saved from the integral privatization of health, education and in general, of all sectors that offer prospects of being profitable.

In modern democratic societies, subjects find themselves immersed in a competition considered to be fair, based on the principle of equal opportunities. From the latter, it is assumed that by giving all competitors the same conditions, the achievements obtained by each are strictly the product of their personal effort. Thus, both the academic successes and the social positions reached, are the correct result of the own merit. Notably, while inequalities of birth or inheritance are considered to be unfair, social inequalities that occur within equal opportunities are legitimate to derive from a competition assumed to be fair (Dubet, 2006).

Equality of opportunity rests on a fiction and on a statistical model which assumes that, in each generation, individuals are proportionally distributed at all levels of the social structure regardless of their origins and initial conditions (Dubet, 2011, p. 54).

Similarly, it is argued that the initial gifts or talents are distributed proportionately among society, so it is enough to offer the same opportunities for everyone to occupy their social posts equally (Dubet, 2011). Indeed, this is an approach which limitations are evidenced by existing statistical data; it shows how social gaps are deepened depending on the origin of individuals. It highlights, for example, the low



representativeness that women or children of workers have in different social spheres (Dubet, 2006, 2011).

Despite the above, the predominant idea within the neoliberal discourse is that all subjects start from the same base and the winners succeed because they have a greater capacity to manage their own trajectory, they are better entrepreneurs of themselves. That is, they manage to build themselves as a successful company. Within this scenario, the deep differences that exist in the line of departure among the participants tend not to be valued by neoliberalism, which it totally bets on the abilities of the contenders. The central problem is the type of subjectivity produced by this model in individuals, who, provided with the technological resources offered in the market, tend to displace the old traditions and values that were more susceptible to solidarity behaviors.

In the context of neoliberal cultures, it grows and develops individualism in which, following the logic of the market, individuals are only interested in those decisions that benefit their particular interests (Tedesco, 1995, 2012). Within the supposedly equitable competition between the actors, the fate of losers matters little, whose unequal but "fair" destiny exempts the rest of the individuals from responsibility. Individualism linked to neoliberal rationality has an enormous potential for exclusion (Tedesco, 1995), which rejects any insinuation of social responsibility. This is a perspective that goes hand in hand with a moral relativism and freedom "to do everything that makes sense to us" (Beyer and Liston, 2001, p.193).

The extreme individualism dyes with its overwhelming consequences almost all the academic spaces, through financing policies that require the application of systems of permanent evaluation to the subjects and to the organisms that group them. They create a climate of fierce competition that collides collegiate university projects which policies do not encourage. Here is where the curricular question comes in, which is the essential collegiate project that is played in institutions of higher education. In this sense, the present article offers a general analysis around the approaches that from the neoliberal discourse are realized around the curriculum. Facing the specific guidelines marked by a mercantilist thinking, which has strong promoters in various international organizations; there is a need for disagreement in favor of the academic and intellectual freedom of teachers.

The harassment of international organizations, the standardization of innovation

The curriculum is not a product objectively disconnected from the social, political and economic events of a certain historical moment. On the contrary, it is a social object (Terigi, 2016) marked by the debates that take place within the framework of broader transformations of which educational systems are part (Beyer and Liston, 2001), and which are accompanied by specific requirements to the school. Hence, it should not be surprising that there is a tendency to turn the curriculum into "an instrument to avoid detected social dangers or to strengthen particular social initiatives" (Beyer and Liston, 2001, p.9).

Currently, as part of the neoliberal discourse, there is an instrumentalization of the curriculum, which guided by a mercantilist thought (Pinar, 2014), it focuses its demands on results; in obtaining certain skills and knowledge for the 21st century that can be measured based on universal standards. In the specific case of higher education, the expectation is about the production of young people with the necessary skills for professional life (Goldman and Pellegrino, 2017). It is a perspective in which the



curriculum is reduced to a tool that, together with teaching and evaluation, ensures the acquisition of the learning required by the global market (Pinar, 2014).

Naturally, the implication sketched in the previous paragraph is limited in order to better understand the importance attached to the curriculum as an instrument that allows the realization of certain aspirations. In this regard, it is necessary to ask ourselves: what is the curriculum? It can be affirmed that this question can infer several things. However, following the work of the founders of the curricular field can be stated that it is the purpose of creating; it is the creation of mechanisms and organization of the contents that are necessary in order to achieve the formative synergies in view of training the subjects towards a professional profile, particularly at undergraduate level. Although it is necessary to recognize that nowadays, postgraduate studies are in many cases the true enabling instance of the future graduates.

It is important to note that, when we want to know what a (university) curriculum is, the first thing that comes out is the syllabus. They are necessary as institutional organizers of the academic-administrative instances, as a justification of the institutional meaning of the training offered by this or that entity. Due to their importance, the curriculum designers have to be attentive to the existing mechanisms of certification, since they have been created to check the degree of updating of the programs. The curriculum designers are now subject to a revision based on certain standards. This is the demand of a society, in which the speed of renewal in the knowledge does not stop increasing.

This standardization is strongly promoted by the governments of certain countries, business organizations, some *think tanks* and especially by international organizations, such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) or the World Bank; their capacities to concentrate, coordinate and execute large-scale actions even exceeds some nations (Croso, 2017). Specifically, it highlights the role that international agencies have played in promoting an economistic conception of education, characterized by the principles of "learning to act competitively in the marketplace and measuring learning to determine the degree of adjustment between the educational system and the economic development "(Croso, 2017, p.3); a stance in which it is affirmed that the establishment of standards allows assuring the educational quality.

With respect to other educational levels, the standardization has even resulted in the development of international tests for the measurement of student learning. In this regard, the evidence of the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an obligatory benchmark for this process. It should be pointed out that this policy has not been extended to higher education as forcefully as in basic education. However, this does not mean the absence of educational policies that promote a standardization of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Thus, at an international and national level, the certification and accreditation of plans and study programs have become a guideline that determines homogeneous evaluation parameters that are affirmed, promote and ensure educational quality.

As expected, the development of standards for higher education has been accompanied by measurement and comparison (often obscure) of educational institutions. It is enough to approach the recent international rankings to observe the continuance of a competition based on merit in which there are winners and losers; institutions of lower and higher quality which have been offered a standardized framework of criteria that, when complied with, legitimates both its educational offer and its position within the international ranking of universities.



This desire to differentiate the best universities from those that are not (being unable to meet certain requirements), is consistent with a neoliberal rationality that structures and organizes discourses, practices, and devices according to the universal principle of competition (Laval and Dardot, 2013). As part of this approach, the triumph or failure is presented as options, choices of individuals who have the sole responsibility for the inadequate or proper management of their destination. Laval and Dardot (2013) refer that the full acceptance of competition as a norm is a product of the establishment of the company as a model of subjectivation; a position that is disseminated with special care through education and the press.

The previous statement points out that speaking of a standardization in higher education does not refer to a homogenization in terms of seeking to implant the factory model that for decades left its mark on how the curriculum was designed and taught in units that were added "to a logical and even disciplinary whole (like the products of an assembly line) "(Pinar, 2014, p.108). On the contrary, the place of the automotive assembly line in the school is changed by one of the corporate workstations, linked to the model of the company (Pinar, 2014). The latter neglects recitation and memorization to allow the use of multiple instructional strategies that facilitate the acquisition of a common minimum of knowledge. This ongoing transition is manifested in the constant criticism made from different spaces and by different actors against what is assumed as an insufficient educational innovation by the educational systems. In this sense:

> The imposition of new assessments and standards alone will not affect the gap between the status quo and what is needed. At present, most educational systems are unable to meet the needs of the 21st century. One important reason to explain this is the outdated perspectives on how people learn and how instruction and evaluation can be designed to be used productively in the service of learning. Research on learning and instruction that has been conducted over the last 60 years provides important principles that should inform the design and evaluation of contemporary learning environments. (Goldman and Pellegrino, 2017, p.30)

Using the advances made in the field of learning, the enterprise model shows itself as flexible and innovative in allowing modifications to the curriculum in order for students and teachers to learn what is required of them (Pinar, 2014). Compared to the factory model, this implies a substantial change in the way the curriculum was designed. But it does not entail a transformation of the ultimate orientation that underlies its main postulates. Pinar states that (2014, p.109), "profit maximization remains the end result of the company as well as its previous version of the factory."

Mercantilist thinking is the basis of curricular proposals that, enriched by the advances of different disciplines, are flexible to the adoption of any strategy that facilitates the achievement of better results. This translates into a scenario where, paradoxically, innovation becomes the standard to follow. Thus, the company's model offers a more sophisticated design focused mainly on the quality of the final product: the training of subjects with the ability to solve problems based on their creativity and critical thinking, that is, with the skills required for a model social and economic that generates, consumes and uses the information incessantly.

Innovation as a standard of curriculum design requires, for example, the inclusion of peer learning, project learning or problem-based learning, as mandatory experiences. From this standpoint, universities' plans and curricula do not strictly integrate existing innovations, these are directly responsible for the inadequate



management of their educational quality. Once it has been established a standard that accurately indicates the requirements to ensure educational success, subsequent deficiencies in education are the responsibility of specific actors. On the one hand, teachers who do not adequately integrate new technologies into their teaching practice, which limits the possibilities to provide innovative experiences to their students. On the other hand, the students who, despite the enormous amount of resources that the information and knowledge society offers, are not able to relate adequately to the school contents.

Innovative curricular designs delimit both the most valuable knowledge and experiences as well as the characteristics that the institutional context should favor for their proper development. Once all the necessary conditions for innovation have been considered, flexibility is even given to the teacher to make adjustments to the curriculum. Within this scenario, the responsibility for what happens subsequently can only correspond to the teachers, who must manage the task in the best possible way. It is an approach that leaves teachers in a particularly challenging position facing educational reform failures. A condemnation that simplifies the complex relationship between the curriculum and the lived curriculum (Furlán, 2014a), which reduces the intricate articulation of practices in the curriculum (Remedi, cited by Furlán, 2014b, Gvirtz and Palamidessi, 2011). In view of this –deliberate- omission, it is necessary to go deeper into the heterogeneous situations in which the practice of university professors develops.

Teachers' working conditions

The neoliberal enterprise model influences on how the curricular proposals are structured today. In this regard, the contradictory place that the teacher has in relation to the curriculum is highlighted: he receives the freedom to innovate as long as this can be translated into the achievement of certain learning standards. What is important is the development of a minimum of fundamental competencies, clearly decided by a select group of officials and experts that suggests the knowledge and experiences that should be kept in mind in order to ensure the adequate professional qualification of students.

However, the successful development of learning for the new economic and social scenarios requires innovative proposals that allow overcoming the different obstacles that appear in the transition from the thought curriculum to the lived curriculum. In this sense, the possibility that the teacher can make changes to the curriculum is a flexibility granted with the purpose of favoring the necessary development of innovative practices.

In the enterprise model, the teacher is a manager with the responsibility of managing student learning (Pinar, 2014). However, the teacher must not only offer the best strategies for the achievement of certain results but also must obtain the greatest possible benefit from them. In this sense, the supposed intellectual freedom that is given to teachers to innovate within the curriculum is a mandatory condition to comply with new bureaucratic parameters (Pinar, 2014).

The standards imposed on plans and curricula, even in their most recent versions, can lead to a subjugated teacher (Pinar, 2014): subject to the fulfillment of certain criteria while being forced to present alternatives that favor learning. A teacher who, under the enterprise model, endorses this task by having been constituted as a "competing subject that must maximize its results by exposing himself to risks that it has to face by taking full responsibility for possible failures" (Laval and Dardo, 2013, p.333).



It is particularly interesting to specify how the teacher's full responsibility for learning is ensured by the close linkage between curriculum, teaching, and assessment. According to Pinar (2014), from the beginning of the curricular field, a limited association was made between the curriculum and the process of teaching³. An approximation accompanied by a false causality between teaching and learning⁴. That is, the approach in which no one can learn without someone who teaches was accepted (Salit, 2016). This statement turns the teacher into the perfect culprit (responsible) for educational failures. The arrival of the evaluation as an instrument to verify the achievements of the school, did nothing more than to complement the unfortunate approaches installed in the theorization of the curriculum, from which it has been sought:

A mechanism for aligning curriculum, teaching, and assessment. Alignment [...] means that all three functions are directed towards the same ends and reinforce each other: evaluation must measure what and how they are actually being taught to students, and what is actually being taught must be related to the curriculum that one wants students to master (Goldman and Pellegrino, 2017, 40).

From that assumption, it would be expected that the success obtained by certain ideas in pilot experiences would be replicable by ensuring the synchronization of the curriculum related to teaching and assessment. This mechanism would provide the teacher an effective management. However, as the fate of different curricular reforms has shown, the implementation of these reforms has had diverse results depending on the context in which they take place (Sargent, 2017). This heterogeneity of achievements and failures, responds to the character of the curriculum as a complex conversation; a space in which the voices of different individuals are connected, who participate in this communication based on their experiences and the present conditions in which they are located (Pinar, 2014).

As Beyer and Liston (2001) refer, the vital experience and cultural formation of individuals impinges on how they reconstruct knowledge embodied in the curriculum. Nevertheless, not only the biography of individuals has influenced the results of the curriculum. Similarly, institutional, political and social contexts affect students' and teachers' experience of it. Thus, race, social class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, cultural identity and other realities intervene in how the curriculum is understood and experienced (Beyer and Liston, 2001).

The foregoing permits a better understanding why the curriculum projects that have been successful in their pilot version get so diverse results in its massive implementation: a curriculum goes through a series of adjustments until it is received by the students. There are majors or programs in which each teacher defines the contents with absolute freedom according to the title of the subject; in these cases, each student runs a unique curriculum according to the teachers and the semester in which he has taken the different courses. The absence of structure in nucleated chairs around a holder who is responsible for the teaching imparted by his team contributes to the curriculum dispersion. But even in curricula designed to be dictated in a certain way, what happens in the classes can be variable depending on how each teacher has built his academic career, the relationship with knowledge, family history, identity generational, and a set of additional processes. In this regard, Remedi (cited by Furlán, 2014b, p.37) refers that:



The attitude of reflection allows us to think that this set of practices existing in the institution that are articulated in an unequal way and in combined processes of the curricular order, the stories of the subjects, daily tasks, etc., enable its analysis as unstable places of identification that open an approach from the institutional on different texts, trying to find in its cross-linking the place of the institutional in its intertextuality.

Remedi (cited by Furlán, 2014b) offers specific clarifications around the curriculum. It delimits clear warnings regarding the mistaken pretension to expect homogeneous results to teachers with an extensive and deep diversity of experiences. Hence, the relationship between the curriculum planned, based on teacher profiles far from reality, and the lived curriculum, built from the historical practice (Furlán, 2014a) of those responsible for implementing curricular changes, has such contrasting results. Around this process, Remedi states the following:

This new perspective led us to develop, forcefully, the concept of curriculum as a set of practices and to think about it at different moments: a first moment was related to the way in which the curriculum was explicit in the institution, that is, how a curriculum is being formalized in specific programs, etc. A second moment observed how the teachers received the curriculum, if they did it as a general plan, knowing the fundamentals and intentionalities, or the form of reception passed only through the program of matter (...). A third moment consisted of seeing how the teachers reflect on the curriculum, that is, how most academic life of teachers leads them to interpret the curriculum in a different way, and decode it according to experience and academic history (...) and lastly, to see how all that presents, becomes visible in practice under the conditions in which institutions work. According to the type of classroom, the type of students, the type of situations that the institution has, the resume is formed again. (quoted by Furlán, 2014, p.39)

At the same time, Remedi (cited by Furlán, 2014) has mentioned that the diversity of elements that influence the implementation of the curriculum also offers a precise recommendation to articulate the curriculum and the curriculum vividly. It is a question of reinforcing the necessary participation of teachers in curricular change processes, in order to grant them the academic and intellectual freedom to intervene in the design of their courses, to define the means they use for teaching and evaluating students' work (Pinar, 2014). This freedom does not refer to the simple curriculum flexibility contemplated within the enterprise model; it also refers a teacher who can adapt the curriculum as long as he did not distance himself from the pre-established goals.

The academic and intellectual freedom in which the teacher must be immersed within the curricular change processes is the one that allows subjects to realize that education can speak to them and that also allows them to speak (Pinar, 2014). That is the sense that is expected to have the intervention of teachers around the curriculum. A historical practice that congruently gives continuity to what has been planned. In short, a curriculum assumed as its own, as teachers, together with students, consciously share "the educational project that contacts them, and regulates their activity" (Furlán, 2014, p.19).

Conclusions



Transnational Curriculum Inquiry 14 (1-2) 2017 http://nitinat.library.ubc.ca/ojs/index.php/tci There is no reason to refuse to get involved in the designing tasks because it will always be preferable to be in the hands of critical people than in the order promoted by neoliberal cultures, especially if there are academic groups that can transmit another worldview and give them a place to counter-hegemonic cultures. As stated by Alicia de Alba (2014), it is necessary to establish a set of theoretical postulates that frame and open clues to the work and struggle of pedagogues involved in these winding ways. In this regard, Pinar states that:

The theoretical field sector [of the curriculum] aspires to establish itself not because of the everyday pressure of the classroom but of the worlds that do not exist in schools today, in marginal ideas to the maximization of profits, and in the imaginative experience that it is not exclusively instrumental nor calculative. (Pinar, 2014, p.108)

As a result of curricular changes processes guided by mercantilist thinking, it is necessary to theorize the curriculum in order to delimit the underlying plots to educational proposals that place innovation as a standard. This reflection must offer the opportunity to reconstruct knowledge and experiences beyond what is provided by the neoliberal rationality that extends producing subjectivities regulated by the principle of competition; individuals to whom education, following the model of the company, must equip the required competencies to succeed in the social scenarios that the new capitalism traces. Of course:

> No institution, which must show proof of its acts to the society that has created it and which sustains it materially and culturally, can immerse itself in a sort of entropic process without being condemned to its own destruction. (Furlán, 2014, p. 18)

However, as a complex conversation, the curriculum gives the possibility of deciding what to remember from the past, what to believe about the present and what to expect and fear of the future (Pinar, 2014). In this way, it opens the possibility of meeting different realities at the same time which based on imaginative experience, creates others. These are precisely the possibilities that should be allowed and defended within the curriculum. Therefore, within the framework of curriculum theory, Remedi's position (quoted in Furlán, 2014b) marks an intervention path for institutions that want to venture into complex design processes and, above all, partial modifications or totals, that is, to implement a curriculum.

In neoliberal times, in which people's subjectivity is very excited and flattened by the demand for continuous competition, what else can be offered better than an attentive and committed listening to the public education that it contains while researching? The first thing to consider is containment, an attentive listening, plus a dialoguing attitude of pedagogues interested in the curriculum can ensure that a meaningful dialogue takes place, or at least open its doors.

Notes

² <u>ripju cnsl@hotmail.com</u>



¹ <u>furlán@unam.mx</u>

³ In making a historical tour of the curricular field development in the United States, Pinar (2014) reports that the obscure association between curriculum and instruction was formally inaugurated with the founding in 1938 of the first Department of Curriculum and Instruction at *Teachers College*, Columbia University. This linking would eventually strengthen from the work of Tyler, particularly with his book *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*, which helped shaping the approach that "teachers are responsible for students' learning, a goal that is assessed through standardized exams" (Pinar, 2014, p.140). However, Pinar (2014) points out that such a legacy should not be exclusively attributed to the founders of the curriculum, since the proposals of the latter were influenced by pragmatists such as William James, who had a deep faith in instrumentalism and referred to the practical value of experience.

⁴ Within everyday language teaching and learning are situated as inseparable processes that make up the same phenomenon (Salit, 2016). By assuming erroneously that learning requires the prior manifestation of teaching; it gives rise to the assumption of a cause-effect relationship between both events (Salit, 2016, p.1). However, as Salit (2016) states:

There may be teaching and no learning; even the learner-student can appropriate partial or different aspects of what was taught. That is, there is no causal relationship between teaching and learning that determines that the former necessarily leads to the latter. The representation of a supposed causality between teaching and learning often impregnates assignments of meaning in everyday life and tends to think of these two processes as if they were inseparable phases of a single phenomenon.

The confusion referred to above results in the widespread denomination of teaching-learning, an approach extended even within the own theorization that scholars, researchers and other specialists carry out around education. The term teaching-learning synthesizes the idea that: the student depends on the teacher to learn, and; the teacher is responsible for his student's learning (Pinar, 2014).

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