Challenges to Curriculum Theory in the 21st Century: Thinking the School Beyond the Basics[1]

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Introduction

Inspired by the theme of the 5th Triennial International Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies Conference, we proposed to develop this article, having in mind the reflections made during this conference, which took place in May 2015, in Ottawa, Canada.

Here, we intend to reflect on the challenges imposed to curriculum theory in our century. Among them, we are interested in analyzing how the uncertainties we face in the contemporary world have intensified movements to search and/or reaffirm basic principles which are seen as capable of minimizing our angst with what we cannot control. It is about discussing these principles and their ability to give us control, and, in doing so, build up to a deconstructed perspective to problematize the logics that hold up our basic principles.

Our analytical perspective seek to "evidentiate otherness, the impossibility of positivity and even the attempts to fix meanings" (Lopes, 2013, p. 11). An alternative movement to the trend that has been highlighted globally and locally in education discourses, characterized, basically, by the affirmation of curriculum as the local of change. This is expressed in projects aimed towards getting rid of uncertainties, betting in organized and coordinated efforts as the possibility of making what is signified be capable of stabilizing society, giving it an ultimate meaning.

Thus, as Lopes (2004) reminds us, the curriculum ends up centered on educational policies. The curriculum is thought of as an identity project, taken for granted as the place where change happens. A perspective view of curriculum, it works as a mechanism of control and regulation of identities, of ways to be in the world.

We question this perspective, starting with problematizing the principles that make it ground. We perceive the focus on knowledge as one of the principles that the appropriation of post-structuralism and post-foundational theory has allowed us to deconstruct. We argue that this focus is supported by realist and essentialist arguments, which, in the discourse, give an universal dimension to a particular knowledge, presented as a guarantee of the quality of education (Macedo, 2009), or as a starting point to think in the terms of what that quality could be. With Laclau (1996), we think the universal as an empty place, filled, temporarily, by hegemonic articulations. With Derrida (1981; 1982; 1985), we propose the thought of translation as political, which gives us the opportunity to intervene in it, but not to have ultimate control over signification.

We call attention to this theory in the following.

Translation and involvement

Deconstructing the perspective of writing/textualization, to Derrida (1981;1982), comes down to his interest in criticizing the role of second fiddle the spoken word, and thought, play to the writing. To him (Derrida, 1997), that is what he calls logocentrism (a privilege of western reason, philosophical ideas, intention, the metaphysics of presence). With that, Derrida (1981; 1997) proposes that we think of writing as a betrayal, a promise to replace the speaker, the spoken father, as a supposed origin of discourse.

The writing, thought of as a replacement, works as a game of *traces* (Derrida, 1982) and a supplement for the lack of presence, it is the order of pure signified, and no external reality or signifier can control, touch or surround it (Derrida, 1981). To the philosopher, the writing word betrays the intention, the attempt at sending a thought, a reasoning, a presence, corrupting, and, therefore, supporting his critics to the "metaphysics of presence". Writing, as a symptom of the *differánce*, gives itself to the infinite substitution, and the substitution of that substitution. In Derrida (1981), the writing leads speech and thoughts to say what they never intended to. His idea of writing dispenses an original thought, a *logos*, because it always translates and simulates.

Extrapolating the supposed original thought, the writing, as intended translation, with violence, with breaking and entering, unfolds continually and subversively. Writing is, therefore, repetition as well as addition, it has no property by itself, it is the indetermination in its fluctuation which makes the game of substitution possible (Derrida, 1981).

In *Plato's Pharmacy*, Derrida (1981) goes in on writing, pointing to its dynamics, or autonomy, not just as related to a supposed origin thought, but also its relationship with the listeners. He punctuates that, even if you try to resist communication, the translation does not realize that, does not allow access to the origin, which makes it possible to disseminate the meanings of a text regardless of what is done in the interaction between speaker/translator. In this case, the listener, even in the place of the signifier, can never fix it, cannot make the text unchangeable or stop the leaking of meanings. This is, therefore, the condition put to all involvement with life, with the world, with politics: translate/write. It is this the concept of translating/writing that we turn to, seeking to place it in Derrida's philosophy as a way of highlighting the political understanding and the subjectivities involved.

We understand that, in Derrida, it is possible to read that every product (a product of the self, of politics, of life) is limited to the negotiation between signified and signifier. There is no transparency in language, and it is much less possible that we can access the essence or origin of the social aspect. More, the idea that interaction and negotiation can only be established through translation is supported. An attempt to understand the other escapes us, the search for access, to give meaning to politics.

Thinking, therefore, of this translation movement as the endless spread of discourse, and, then, as a support of the equivalencies produced by difference, we think it is important to problematize it as a contagious operation, and a strong proposer of policy. To think of that process, let us stick to Jacques Derrida discussion of translation.

From the ideas developed by Derrida (1985), in *Des Tours de Babel*, we call attention to the concept of translation as an unconscious performance. It's basically means thinking of it not as an option of the individual when face with the text where the world and its politics are made, but as the only possibility of extracting meaning from them, and existing in them. According to the philosopher, translation imposes insurmountable limits, which make it impossible for the translator/agent/individual to maintain and reproduce the "original" intention of a text. To Derrida

(1982), said performance is an act of communication not limited to transmitting information of semantic content.

When Derrida (1985) thinks of "Babel" as possessing a name, while at the same time questioning if we know what we are naming when we say "Babel", he inserts the critic of western concepts and metaphysics as a transparent and conscious option. Thus, he highlights his opposition to logocentric ideas that, in translation, we have speakers and listeners acting in full intentional control. Quite the contrary, Derrida (1982) says that *leftovers*, a remainder, are always there, there is always a dissemination that escapes any attempt to fixate a text, or politics, or rules, or boundaries to any signifier.

The author considers writing/translation as an attempt to conciliate the intent, but there are nothing more than traces, traces which make their own asymmetry and the break up with the intent, with the possibility of total understanding and with the conscience of the individual as an organizing center.

The inability of accessing the original meaning lies in intent and iterability, stopping any full presence or conscience. Derrida (1982), therefore, ponders on the place of writer and reading, concluding that, when it comes to the writing, their position is the same: they are both translators/writers, since neither possesses absolute knowledge, both are susceptible to the writing as a changing structure.

There is, in this insert by Derrida (1982) with his idea of *traces*, the perspective that we are endlessly doing the job of corroding through asymmetry, of leftovers that escape to the meaning. We argue that these leftovers do not derive from an intentional desire to cause a rupture, but are the result of an excess of language, through which the real leads to traces. This reinforces the reading of asymmetry as a rupture of a conscious intent. This affirmation allows us to highlight that only through this excess of language, though these traces and leftovers, we can think of an unconscious subjectivity, an individual made in the translation of politics, of the text where politics are made.

The *trace* (Derrida, 1982), as this evidence of dissemination, exposes the spread of a supposed intent of the speaker, and highlight the idea that the process is the result of the articulation with a context, the result of an interaction produced by language. The *trace* is an event, it is the result of a given context, and it is impossible to think of it outside of this context. To the author, it is interesting to think of these ruptures as starting the very possibility of this language game. A context product which, because it is a result of the singularity of the trace, does not possess any other meaning, does not carry content and does not follow any order; does not refer to any intent or origin other than its own having happened and being new.

It is considering this that we focus on the translation as an event, as a supplementation, as an unique production, the writing. The context here is not a neutral space with characteristics that can be objectively identified, but as a structure built on supposition. According to Fish (1982), Derrida punctuates his idea of context by distancing it from the traditional vision, which conceives it as a given, but instead pointing to the context as a product of the world.

Still according to Fish (1982), Derrida considered that only through supposing that we are interacting with something, or that a common ground exists, can we deduce certain characteristics. It is from deducing, from something's meaning, that we can read and build a context. To Derrida (1982), a context is an interpretative construct, based on the assumption of a consensus, yet structurally vague, tending to attempt to coordinate what its limits should be, to

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create rules or general agreements. To the philosopher, a context is never completely determined, and it can never be saturated.

This structural incompleteness is a result of the dynamic of rupture inside the context itself. This is because, according to Derrida (1982), the iterability (repetition and citation of what we supposedly refer to) ends up making it so that, for as much as we seek to faithfully contextualize a citation, we will never keep intact the meaning of what we are merely attempting to reproduce. In this that we emphasize the singular and intense aspect of translation as repetition/writing, thinking both of what it produces and how it defeats any attempt to make it homogenous.

Thinking of iteration/translation as a means of articulation and irresistible, permanent betrayal (in which all and nothing ever stay) is to punctuate that contexts are fragile, built on the faith (Derrida, 2002) that they are dealing with the same thing as a given signifier. They are fractured at the core, as the repetition of the *différance* leads to the failure of any intent or even mentions of the original. At this point, the origin or the common space of the context has been destroyed by the wide range or the nameless accents and spreading meanings. And so, by mentioning the context, we are already outside of it nor are we accessing it, but betraying its idea, creating other contexts. The reference is, therefore, a rupture, a disagreement, iterating a meaning of otherness, it is another context.

To Derrida (1982), the iteration is marked by difference, changes and creates something new. It contaminates the intention and makes the act of performing/speaking/writing/translating be something different that what was intended. In this perspective, we maintain that every statement is open to contextual ruptures. The author says that iterability, even though it authorizes this, corrupting the rules and codes that make itself, also spreads the changes through repetition, the spreading through citation.

In this reading, Derrida (1982) thinks the context as the place of impossible completeness and control, since in the iterability/writing/translation there is already a game, a gap, an independence from its origin, from the living intent or the production. He highlights, with this, the impossibility to determinate the context in which something was produced, the intent behind a statement of meaning, given the supplementary character which, from the start, changes the intent. For as much as it is necessary to delimitate a context, that delimitation suffers an intervention by *différance*, especially if we consider the fluctuation that motivates every sign (Derrida, 1982).

The author argues that any mark thought as writing, and writing as a separate function, as capable of operating beyond the intended meaning, primarily conceived as a disrupting, can be mentioned, cited, quoted. When doing it, the structure is made dynamic, generating countless other contexts which, as mentioned, are themselves impossible to saturate. The iterability of a mark (a term, a name), its citation possibilities or its duplication possibilities are not an accident, but what a mark cannot do without in order to operate "normally" (Derrida, 1982). From this assertion, Derrida questions, then, what could make a mark impossible to quote.

Writing as iteration, intervening in communication by exceeding it, unfolding in dissemination that is never reduced to multiple meanings, cannot be thought as an object of hermeneutical decoding, or unveiling of an original truth or meaning. The betrayal, as conceived by Derrida, lies in the writing that, on one hand, does not want to neglect the existence of the intent or the conscience. Intent has its place, but from that place it can no longer control all derived meaning.

Intent, to Derrida (1982), cannot even be present to itself and the content. It is essentially empty, and that emptiness, or its structural unconsciousness, is what the French-Algerian philosopher will put as the reason why it is impossible to saturate or completely comprehend a context. In opposition to Austin, the author considers that, for a context to be completely saturated, the intent would have to be its main point, making it necessary that said intent would be transparent and absolutely present to itself and everyone.

In Derrida's perspective (1981;1982;1985) the translation may be supplementation, betrayal, a promise to represent what is missing or a transformation of a meaning that cannot be transported or comprehended. This unfinished aspect is the mark of Babel (Derrida, 1985). From this notion, he makes us think of translation as the subjectification by the other, a nod to the concept that translating/writing/iterating is the possibility of accessing the signifying of the world itself.

Derrida (1985) argues that the babelian performance consists in making it so that an element can at the same time mean and be untranslatable, belongs without belonging to a specific language, and is capable of creating unsolvable doubts to the translator. The acting of individuals/translators never stops, making the spreading of a political text, of politics themselves, operate continuously, coming back to the impossibility of translating a text which is produced in multiple languages simultaneously.

He states that a translator never stops his/her personal work, even if under the council and inspiration of a preceding work, and so the translator starts the act of creation by co-opting, combining, and adapting, making the text not the same by the influence of their personality, even if the translator believes him or herself to be working towards a careful transmission of something has not even reached. This is the one and only, and unreachable, possibility for the existence of an original. Every translation is, therefore, an original product when it is made, it always corrupts a preceding meaning.

So we agree with Derrida (1985) when he concludes that the text is alive and under context regeneration through translation, which is nothing but a promise. This impossible task blames the translator, but also acquits the translator, who cannot do more or less than what is done.

The fluid foundations supporting Curriculum

Keeping in mind the notions discussed above, we focus on the education field, looking to build lenses that may help us put the unstable character of the truths which support it in perspective. In order to do that, we look to the idea that Education was built as a key cultural project in the process of the hegemonic constitution of modernity, made possible by repackaging social life itself, from a movement of rupture with the past and the establishment of new forms of thinking how the social works (Peter & Burbules, 2004).

Having no intention to deepen, in this text, the characteristics of this wide and diverse movement we have here named modernity, it is fitting to highlight that the importance Education has in this movement can be expressed in the way different metanarratives have bet on its redeeming possibilities. This bet is that, with Education, we could build a just and equal society, as long as we knew how to select the basic contents of curriculum which would be capable of guaranteeing that societal project, and, with them, develop precise projects to form individuals. A project that Biesta (2006) defines as the intersection of subjects in a rational community, assumed as a condition for emancipation.

The certainties that characterize the discourse may, as Lopes (2013) warns, be mystifying, and also remind us of essentialism, leading to a direct association between clarity and "the idea of a single voice, and, even more arguable, of a single unquestionable authority in meaning" (p. 10)

These are the certainties which the "post" perspectives have problematized, criticizing the ways how modern thought tend to conceive the social. Still with Lopes (2013), we have to highlight that

> the prefix "post" refers to abandoning essentialist axioms. Being "post" a movement or school of thought (structuralism, colonialism, modernism, foundationalism, marxism) implies to problematize that same movement or school of thought, to question its bases, its possibilities and impossibilities. It is not a liner advancement, not an evolution or an overcoming where the traces of the movement or school of thought are erased (p. 10).

From this definition, we take a perspective of post-structuralist and post-foundationalist analysis, which allows us to leave behind objectivist, essencialist and realist axioms, to then state that what we call reality is a product of discourse, and therefore we must question any pretense of objectivity.

The goal is to radicalize the understanding of reality, restating it as being mediated by language, through the defense of a fluidity of signified and signifier and by un-building the unity of the sign. In other words, a radical defense of the claim that reality can only be accessed through language. A radical critique to the idea of a transparent language, direct expression of "reality", supported by the understanding that language is always about the relationship between signifier and signified.

In our studies, we have highlighted the contributions of Laclau (1996), an author who understands the social as a discursive production, to think about the attempts to give a definite and closed meaning to names in curriculum policy. Laclau develops a concept of discourse as a theoretical and analytical category, allowing us to investigate the mechanisms through which meanings are produced and how they happen in producing the social. The author conceives discourse as a practice of signification. Therefore, to Laclau, speech, texts, practices, institutions, as everything else that can produce meaning, are discourses. Nothing exists beyond the discursive surface (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). The authors here take discourse as a mean of articulation which is precariously and temporarily structured. It is impossible to shut down any attempts of creating meaning.

Based on this definition, we incorporated in our reflections, also thanks to Laclau (1996), the idea of translation proposed by Derrida (1997) to question the idea that texts, among them the curricular text, are charged with *a priori* meanings. For us, it consists in a structural idea of text that is based on the idea that meanings are fixed into a system, and also organizes arguments in defense of any projects that may determinate how individuals will be. With Derrida (1997) we understand that translations is the only possibility of relationship in the language, in the interactions with the other, in the field of curricular discourse.

So we problematize all the discourse that organize itself based on the idea that reality, and the phenomena we experience in it, can be completely represented by language, like in a transparent road which allows access to the "true" meanings of the text the world is made of. To this understanding, we add the statement that an opaque language does not give out direct meanings, neither does it give conscience or wholeness, but we operate in a world made understandable by different and multiple meanings (Derrida, 1985).

The intelligibility of a text is not related to a choice by the individual, but to the possibilities he/she has of giving the text meaning. We emphasize, however, that this cannot be

taken as limiting meanings, but it is just a possibility among others, and is always exposed to other's view (Laclau, 1996; Derrida, 1981; 1985; 1992). Intelligibility is simply a way of creating meanings on the world, a way of operating, as one can, in the language games (Laclau, 1996).

Accepting the idea of translating implies recognizing that there is not a truth that can be accessed. There is not an original locus where meaning is created, or even a way to control it. Every signification, according do Derrida, is original, since it cannot be a copy (Derrida, 1985).

From these contributions, we want to understand the traditional concepts of curriculum as a project of identity construction, as discourse sewn on the foundation of a whole identity. Attempts to stabilize and control the subjectivations, through schooling, through a perspective of the world that does not admit any other. This control is justified by the pretense of the existence of a ground below certainties.

Here, from a post-foundationalist point of view, we are not opposed to the need of a foundation, or betting in dispersive differences and isolated contexts. We are questioning the idea of fixated foundations capable of organizing society from outside society. We operate on the idea of contingent foundations, temporary and precariously built, in discursive articulations. We problematize the idea of control, since we understand control is only justified by acts of power, guide by contingent truths (short or long lived), without anything fixed or immune to corrections. We question the productivity of continuing to operate like anything ultimate on reality exists, anything capable of sustaining the pretense of fixed control.

Based on modern principles, curriculum has molded itself as an emancipator in the production of individuals, and its realization assumes a basic handle on subjects that are considered the most adequate. As Biesta (2006) puts, a project which reduces the right to education to the right to learn. The right to learn specific content that have been selected as the proper ones. A project which either ignores or subordinates, seeking control over the processes of subjectivity by blocking differential fluxes that consist on the making of the individual, or on giving exclusive meanings to the unexpected (Macedo, 2012).

A logic which reduces emancipation to a teaching project "in which acquiring specific knowledge would make it possible to build an identity previously defined as the most adequate, limiting, or trying to limit, manifestations of otherness, of difference" (Tura & Pereira, 2013, p. 120). A logic that is justified while that knowledge is given as an expression of reality (Young & Muller, 2007). So the appropriation of a given subject would give the individuals (emancipated) the opportunity of intervening in a world, trying to build a fully realized society.

In our view, this discourse articulates realism-based meanings, opposed to the antirealism approach we defend. A discourse that articulates realistic senses of knowledge and culture which support ways of classification and exclusion in several works in curriculum field (Lopes, 2012; Macedo, 2012). Acts of power capable of signifying, creating and combating meanings (Lopes & Macedo, 2011), benefiting an education that is reduced to the pedagogical, centered on the methodological, in transmitting a given knowledge, in knowing how to teach. Acts of power based in realistic concepts of knowledge and culture, which underpin attempts to control senses that Laclau and Mouffe (2001) assume as necessary and impossible to completely fulfilled.

Since we assume not be able to operate a foundational or structural reading of the world, but we bet in translators performances and therefore betraying a certain sense, we propose as a strategical possibility two arguments for reflection on curriculum thinking, that is produced politically, that produces curriculum policies: caution and possibility of intervening.

Strategically, caution would show us the impossibility of making any final remarks on whatever it may be on the curricular sphere, since, on defending that there are not ultimate readings or even ultimate meanings, we cannot accept any such final statements. Such acceptance relates also to the way we deal in policy, considering that the impossibility to access a given knowledge or identification, including that perspective we aim to combat, is to interpret that, in the same movement, it is blocked the possibility to achieve, "in fact", such truth, and also that it is not be able to saturate the discourse, the experience, cannot encompass the full curricular horizon.

At the same time, in relation to the idea of intervention, is worth emphasizing that it is impossible to access a transparent reading of reality, constructed discursively, which empowers us is precisely this incompleteness or non-closure of the social, in its continuous discursive construction. This means that, like caution stops us from making any statements on reality as it should be, the possibility of intervention is given by the ways we translate and consider possible to operate in language.

In other words, if we cannot deal with language transparently, and this condition is valid to all involvement (and it limits us), all we can do to intervene is to translate these knowledge meanings, in education, in the curriculum, in every different power spheres. Accepting the idea of education as incomplete and acting in it, accepting it is impossible to completely stop the construction of meanings through which the world becomes understandable. As Laclau (1996), we state that in this being unfinished the potential for democracy resides.

Taking these marks as our limits to what comes to be a perspective on curricular thought in the 21st century means calling attention to the impossible when it comes to the ways to control or ultimately state what is the individual, what is education or what is society. It means recognizing that the potential to intervene is boundless, but the domination of the discourse is not viable, as there always leaks and translations, and they may or may not agree with the statement, but they will always betray.

So it is possible to think the curriculum as a practice of enunciation, an endless flux of meanings that cannot be locked up, which rupture with any idea of curriculum as an identity conditioner that are, in our view, not productive if we aim towards a democratic educational project. A project negotiated from recognizing that we live in a time without certainties and without ultimate truths. A project that needs incorporate the differences expressed in particular demands. We understand that this is a great challenge to curricular theory in the current century. A century that lives the constant regeneration of its signification, by the same processes in which we defend not be possible to ensure a fixed place in the discourse, to say who is the subject or what is the society in curriculum policy.

Taking these arguments in the direction of curricular thought is a continuous bet to leave them incomplete, as a discourse through which different ideas can be built, here or anywhere else, looking to find a horizon, a democratic one, but not through affirming any properties of democracy, but through struggles around the curriculum meaning.

A vision of democracy residing in the possibility of reaching a fixed horizon, emphasizing the opportunities for new articulations to leads us to new ideas, to new meanings, in this that we call the 21st century. We propose to accept that, while we criticize new ways of control, we also seek to control certain perspectives, because we want a homogenous world view. It is fitting to highlight, however, that the moment that encourages a political affirmation, an identification process, is the same that leads to its criticism. This does not mean to think of every request as

valid, but that, in a certain context, even though we cannot control truth, we can contaminate the discourse as long as it is always something else.

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Notes

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