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Research as a curriculum movement: teacher protagonism as a pathway to learning

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Abstract

This paper analyzes some curriculum practices developed in a Colombian school in which an experimental education project has been carried out. By taking the Foucauldian genealogy as our theoretical-methodological reference, we aim at evidencing some curriculum movements produced in that environment. The study shows that research as an educational principle and teacher protagonism can be important movements in the construction of a kind of education that is more concerned with the needs of the subjects and the local community and less committed to fixed, predetermined standards from which school curricula have been usually established.

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1. Introduction

Research inside the school and beyond as a curriculum movement. This is the starting point for discussion in this text. In the first section, we attempt to present the practice here considered by locating it among the findings of a more comprehensive research from which this study has stemmed. In the second section, we present Escuela Pedagógica Experimental, the Colombian institution where the experiment discussed here has been performed. Finally, in the third section, from the studies already carried out, we attempt to think about research by focusing on that Colombian school, its curriculum relationships amidst schooled and non-schooled practices, and its emphasis on teacher protagonism.

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2. School and non-school curricula

The objective of the research Curriculum in schooled and non-schooled environments in Brazil and Colombia: different relationships between learning and teaching is to problematize schooled and non-schooled curricula, in an attempt to analyze schooled and non-schooled movements and how such concepts have been articulated. The research was approved by the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (Edital MCTI/CNPq Nr. 14/2013) and is linked to the Post-Graduation Program – Master Course in Teaching, Univates University Center. The research has addressed curriculum movements in four places: a school in Brazil, a school in Colombia, and a non-governmental organization (NGO) and a museum in Brazil.

We live in a highly schooled and pedagogicalized society where "school has been once and for all established as the great truth to which we all subject" (HATTGE, 2013, p. 95). According to Segura (2000, p. 159), "the school as it is nowadays is a scientifically supported institution whose management has been generally successful and, finally, has met the society's expectations". Of course, there are criticisms to its processes as well as questioning of its outcomes, but it is almost a consensus that every child should undergo the schooling process.

Noguera-Ramirez (2011) has analyzed the institution of what he called "learning society" (NOGUERA-RAMÍREZ, 2011, p. 21), in which, on the one hand, we can notice the "extension of the educative function beyond the school" (NOGUERA-RAMÍREZ, 2011, p. 21) ; on the other hand, there is the "resulting demand for constant and life-long learning by the inhabitants of this new social place, a demand that causes us to regard them as permanent learners" (NOGUERA-RAMÍREZ, 2011, p. 21).

It is understandable that the frontiers separating school from non-school contexts have been often questioned, relocated and re-signified by schooled and non-schooled movements, which have posed us different questions along the research. Therefore, we attempt to understand which curriculum movements have been instituted in the practices performed in each one of the places addressed.

The research began in March 2013. Based on Michel Foucault's thought, the study has used genealogy as its methodological principle. Genealogy, from a Foucauldian perspective, can be understood as

> [...] the attachment of knowledge to local memories, which allows the constitution of historical knowledge about fights and the use of such knowledge in present tactics (FOUCAULT, 2002, p. 15).

In this sense, as an initial methodological movement, it was necessary to search for local knowledges in every research environment – yellowish files, legal documents and archives, as well as texts written by teachers and managers of the surveyed institutions. Furthermore, is was necessary to talk to teachers that took part in the writing of those documents, as they would be able to contextualize and question them, and detail the movements made in their production.

However, it is important to explain that, in accordance with the genealogical perspective, we do not intend to reconstruct a "true" history by looking for a supposed essence that could characterize the institution and its actors. Rather, we attempt to understand how certain discursive and non-discursive practices have been instituted, the forces that have operated on their institution, how the subjects have related to them and which effects they have produced on that environment. Thus, through the analysis of those materials (documents, scientific texts, interviews), it is possible to know the process of constitution of those environments and evidence some practices that have constituted different curriculum movements, thus allowing several articulations. In this text, we focus on curriculum practices performed in Escuela Pedagógica Experimental in Bogota, Colombia.

3. Escuela Pedagógica Experimental and the institution of an ever-changing curriculum

Escuela Pedagógica Experimental, or EPE, was founded in 1977, when a group of five teachers working at Universidad Distrital decided to start the project with the objective of constructing an educational environment (SEGURA et al, 1999). With time, the school was integrated into a corporation that invests in teaching, research and extension projects. The following excerpt from an interview shows such a movement:

> [...] the school was started in 1977 with five owners. In 1986, there were two owners because the others sold their shares. In 1986, we decided to increase the number of partners of that limited partnership until 1991. In 1992, the corporation was instituted, and all the partners either donated or sold their shares to make it a corporate non-governmental organization. (Interviewee F)

EPE was born as an experimental education project intended to disrupt the modern school model and its stratified ways to approach knowledge, space, time and subjectivity.

> For many people, more than being a formal education institution, a pedagogical laboratory or a place where proposals are designed and tested, the raison d'être of EPE is the possibility of inspiring changes in the educational system (SEGURA et al, 1999, p. 42).

Since 2012, EPE has kept an agreement with the Pedagogy course of Univates University Center, and every semester two students undergo training in the school[1]. The purpose of this agreement is to make possible for Pedagogy students to have pedagogical experiences in schools whose curricula have been organized differently. This is the case in EPE.

The school was strongly established from the denial of both curricula and practices regarded as "traditional" by its founders. One of the statements that are often heard from the school teachers is that EPE does not have a curriculum, as we can see in the following fragment of interview:

> Considering that the traditional view of curriculum as content organization, in which contents are seen as a list, a logical sequence from simple to complex, from this perspective, the school doesn't have a curriculum, that is, from such perspective we talked about, we don't have a curriculum. We don't respond to that kind of thing. We have a different proposal in which (…) the subjects construct their knowledge. In this sense, there isn't a pre-established order of actions that, for example, would allow or make that construction possible. (…) In that series of interactions, everyone interacts in a particular way. The group interacts as a whole, but there are subtleties in the interaction of each individual. (Interviewee M)

"Schooling is awfully mortiferous", states Gutiérrez (2000, p. 101). The school thought as a synonym for schooling is related to education with institutionalized objectives, whose actions seek for "uniformization of several sociability patterns and lifestyles under the citizenship veil" (CORRÊA; PREVE, 2011, p.188). It is possible to notice that EPE, in its curriculum movements, attempts to distantiate from a schooling model. Despite being constituted as a school environment and acknowledged by the Ministry of Education in Colombia, the school has produced disruptions with the marks of schooled education for more than three decades.

> What we actually require from a school is neither education nor knowledge, but certificates. We have arrived at this unfortunate, unspeakable situation because we have

[1] Eight students have undergone the training at Escuela Pedagógica Experimental as required by the Pedagogy course curriculum.

> seen schooling as education. Naively, we believe that schools educate, but that is not true. The school does not educate, it does not have time to do that. The school instructs and does it very badly. Despite being compulsory, free school is still the slogan used by politicians from every party (GUTIÉRREZ, 2000, p. 100).

Marques and Hattge (2013) carried out a research to understand the different views of curriculum that have been mobilized in the school. In order to do that, they interviewed the school teachers and students of Univates Pedagogy course that underwent curricular training at EPE. The authors say:

> We know that sight "has been celebrated as a privileged sense able to perform an accurate mediation between us and reality, i.e. to show how the world really is" (VEIGA-NETO, 2002, p. 24). In this paper, however, we have a different objective by bringing forward the view issue. Our intention is not to say how the EPE curriculum really should be and understood. Our intention is to show that meanings are instituted from different ways of looking at them, thus producing distinct experiences on approaching the same space. From the interviews with the Colombian teachers, it was possible for the student and her advisor to perceive how those teachers understand the school curriculum – as a school concerned with the students' interests, in continuing construction and development, a school that prioritizes meaningful learning, is interested in daily topics and addresses issues related to the society as a whole. Univates students regard EPE's curriculum similarly. (...) Activities challenge students to think, design strategies to solve problems and research into the studied subject or theme. In this way, students become protagonists of their own learning process and their academic and personal growth and development (2013, p. 72-73).

In the next section, we analyze more deeply the way the research that was started at EPE and has been extended to the social environment has become an important movement in the curriculum and produced effects on the modes of teacher and student subjectivation at EPE.

4. Research started at the school as a curriculum movement: teacher protagonism

On analyzing how the curriculum has constituted relationships at EPE, our attention is drawn to how research has become a routine practice there. The investigation projects, as they are called, gather teachers and students around a variety of themes and usually enable inter- or trans-disciplinary experimentations. These investigation projects go beyond the school boundaries and expand to build bonds with the school community, as it is the case of the project entitled Blue Economy, which seeks to problematize practices that affect the planet and the ways that learning related to sustainability can occupy the school space. In interaction with the school community and the local community, EPE has tried to find solutions for imperious environmental problems both inside and outside the school, such as the recovery of a stream in the school surroundings. To do so, teachers and students have allied themselves with other professionals that can contribute with their knowledge, as well as with community people that, not necessarily having professional education, may be considered as experts in a particular theme and contribute with their knowledge to help find a solution for the problems they are facing.

We believe that in the school we must do much to prepare for living in a rapidly changing world and, at the same time, have a solid education to contribute to those changes. The goal is that all human beings are happy and able to share our existence by respecting the existence of other living beings. (CORPORACIÓN ESCUELA PEDAGÓGICA EXPERIMENTAL, 2014, s.p)
This project is an example of how to get away from that curriculum and, say, integrate all the areas. (…) So, teachers from every area are working in this project and learning. (interviewee V)

Inherent to this possibility of knowledge construction that disrupts the disciplinary and hierarchical frontiers of knowledges, we would like to highlight an issue that has drawn our attention amongst the curriculum practices developed in the school. Research at EPE has been usually associated with teacher protagonism, since students have the chance to construct their knowledge through searching, experimenting, exchanging with their classmates and the environment. But it is possible to perceive that more than, or even before, investing in teacher protagonism, EPE invests in the student protagonism. This was the first challenge faced by the school, as we can see in the excerpt below:

> Trust teachers so that they could generate options of a different school according to their context – that was the idea. (Interviewee F)

5. Conclusion

The partial results obtained from the research have enabled us to perceive that, amidst discussions about curriculum, we intend to understand to what extent the concepts of school and schooling have been intertwined, thus defining curriculum movements. From this perspective, EPE is a potent place for investigation, as it is a school that seeks to create fissures in the curriculum model of the modern school. However, the research does not either aim at finding an ideal curriculum or working with the comparative notion of "good" and "bad" curricula. The focus is on the situations and conditions that enabled the emergence of such curricula, as well as on possibilities of weaving other curriculum movements and relationships. One of the issues that have become apparent up to this moment and we have attempted to evidence in this text is the importance of a research practice that goes beyond the school limits, in order to solve community problems; this is only possible through the reconfiguration of teacher subjectivity. A teacher that plays the main role in other ways of experiencing the schooling process by disrupting knowledge hierarchies makes possible the student protagonism, thus allowing the experimentation of new schooled configurations in their intersections with non-schooled practices in a continued movement.

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