ARTIGOS

Equality, Difference and Knowledge: what are the possibilities of common learning standards when there is a "tension" between rights? [1] [2] [3] [4]

Igualdade, Diferença e Conhecimento: o que pode uma base curricular comum em meio à "tensão" entre direitos?

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Abstract

Taking as a starting point the context of educational inequalities which has long characterized the Brazilian case, the present article aims to investigate some of the different conceptions regarding school knowledge and its distribution, which foresee different justifications and solutions for this scenario. In this process, we highlight the role that a national curriculum framework could play in the different perspectives and controversies around the proposal, from the tension between the right to equality and the right to difference. A third dimension of the idea of right is then brought up to discussion, as an attempt to overcome what some authors consider to be a "crisis" in curriculum theory (Young).

Keywords: socio-educational inequalities, sociocultural differences, knowledge, national curriculum framework

Resumo

Partindo de um cenário de desigualdades educacionais que há muito caracteriza a realidade brasileira, o presente texto busca investigar algumas das diferentes concepções sobre o conhecimento escolar e sua distribuição, que preveem justificativas e encaminhamentos distintos para esse quadro. Nesse processo, destacam-se o papel que uma base curricular comum poderia desempenhar nas diferentes perspectivas e as controvérsias que giram em torno da proposta, a partir de um tensionamento entre o direito à igualdade e à diferença. Uma terceira dimensão de direito é então abordada, como parte de uma tentativa de superação daquilo que alguns autores vêm considerando ser uma "crise" nas teorias sobre currículo (Young).

Palavras-chave: *desigualdades socioeducacionais, diferenças socioculturais, conhecimento, base nacional comum*

Resumen

Partiendo de un panorama de la situación de desigualdades educativas que durante mucho tiempo ha caracterizado la realidad brasileña, este texto busca investigar algunas de las diferentes concepciones sobre el conocimiento escolar y su distribución que proporcionan diferentes justificaciones y soluciones para esta situación. En este proceso, se destaca el papel que podría desempeñar una base curricular común en diferentes perspectivas, y las controversias que rodean la propuesta, debido a una tensión entre el derecho a la igualdad y la diferencia. Finalmente, se aborda una tercera dimensión de derecho, como parte de un intento de superar lo que algunos autores han considerado como una "crisis" en las teorías curriculares (Young, 2013).

Palavras clave: *desigualdades socioeducacionales, diferencias socioculturales, conocimiento, base nacional común*

Introduction

In the last years, the academic community in the educational field has been involved in heated debates on the use of an official national curriculum framework. In fact, the controversies originated by the proposal were discussed not only by academics, but also other education professionals and segments of civil society as a whole. These people tended to assemble themselves in more favorable or more contrary positions to the imminent policy, especially the latter ones.

However, as pointed out by Cossentin (2017), the debates provoked by the so-called *Base Nacional Comum Curricular* (BNCC- National Curriculum Framework) go way beyond the official proposal. In fact, they refer to what they presuppose and what the creation of a common framework and its implementation in Brazilian schools mean. On one hand, the initiative is seen as positive from those who emphasize the universality of education and its right as a pathway to equality and social insertion. In this sense, school, as a republican and democratic institution, would play an important role to decrease social inequalities. On the other hand, a project such as this can be detrimental to guarantee the right to the differences and contradictory to the educational reality of the country, marked by local contingencies and great cultural diversity. On its turn, this would end up being denied in favor of an incoherent standardization of the contexts of implementation. This way, it would reinforce and reproduce already existing inequalities.

In the limits of this essay, we aim to analyze some of these assumptions that are behind the idea of a common national framework and that originate many of the disagreements seen in the discussion of the policy itself. Thus, instead of leaning over the official text, we aim to explore some tensions around it, such as those between universality and relativism, equality and difference, and the apparent dispute through what is believed to be the right to each of them. The decision to resume the focus on the grounding principles of an officially homologated policy arises from the perception that the controversies around it are potentially revived in schools and/or educational systems, when faced by its implementation– the phase we are currently experiencing. In this sense, the doubts, the uneasiness, and the disagreements that mark the trajectory of the Framework are now rekindled, gaining new contours in the local contexts, and possibly creating uncertainties on what exactly should be implemented, resignified, or resisted. Besides this, the interest on school knowledge acquires new life when we see the growth of scientific denialism and the weakening of truth in the national scenario.

The reading proposed here aims to contribute by setting the field related to school knowledge and educational inequalities, through the brief review of the bibliography on the area of sociology of education, articulated in the Brazilian context and the specific discussions about BNCC. The effort to not lose sight of the theme of inequalities is because one of the main concern of policies, among them BNCC, is to overcome them and, at least theoretically, to improve educational quality in the country. Thus, throughout this discussion, we seek to pay attention to the potential that such an initiative would have regarding the decrease or the reproduction of the deep educational inequalities that characterize the Brazilian context.

We believe that this effort of synthesis can be particularly useful to those that seek an initial understanding of the several disputes held around recent educational policies that, as affirmed by Moreira (2003), have in school knowledge their main instrument of implementation. This way, we aim to contribute to the critical analyses to be developed, for instance, by pre-service teachers or by those that may not have closely followed the discussions on the adoption of a common national curriculum framework and are now confronted with new debates and conflicts during implementation.

To do so, the text is divided into four sections, besides this introduction. In the first one, we aim to draw a brief diagnosis of the educational inequalities scenario in Brazil, from its articulation to similar phenomena in other countries who expanded their educational systems during the 20th century. After, we revisit the critical contributions on school failure, initially developed in the same countries that bring to the center of the discussion about the inequalities of students' performance the issue of chosen content. In the third section, we deepen the curriculum theme through the perspective of multicultural post-critical studies, which show the tensions between universalism and cultural relativism, and the right to equality and to difference. Finally, we refer to the most recent works of Young (2009, 2013), an author who had actively participated in the criticisms seen in the second section, and whose current contributions (though the object of further criticisms) represent an attempt to overcome what he considers to be a crisis on the theory of the curriculum, based on an appeal to the "right to knowledge" entitled to all students. In this moment, we try to relate certain argumentative strategies that have been marking the debate about BNCC and the considerations of the authors on the loss of focus that could be seen in some criticisms done by curriculum theoreticians. We also highlight the importance of revisiting this debate in times of denialism and obscurantism in the national context.

The expansion of access and the resulting inequality of success

It is basically impossible to discuss school knowledge without relating it to social inequalities, as the educational systems were historically developed in societies structured by unequal social relations, deeply echoed in school performance (Valle, 2014, p. 20). The expansion these systems have experienced, mainly during the 20th century, to incorporate other

groups beyond a small socioeconomic elite, is a phenomenon typical of modern societies that aim to reorganize social stratification from other bases besides heredity. In other words, if before the social position of individuals was defined according to their family belonging, in modernity this process should be based upon the competences acquired by each one during a "competitive educational process". Thus, the expansion of schooling access took place amidst promises of a "meritocratic" school which would contribute to have "increasingly more opportunities for the relatively disadvantaged to be able to win through the selection, extraordinarily regulated by universalist rules" (Parsons, 1974, p. 119). These promises, however, did not come to fruition.

An important milestone in the rupture of this "optimistic" view was the release of several macro sociological studies– supported by quantitative surveys and statistical analysis – ordered by the English, French, and American governments[5] since the end of the 1950s, to relate access to school and social mobility. The results of these studies pointed out that, despite the expansion of access, strong relations between students' school performance and their social, ethnical, and economic origins continued, which seemed to determine their reach within the system.

In the Brazilian case, in which school expansion happened late, the impacts seen on the structure of inequality were not different. When access to school was restricted, historically reserved "to the preparation of leading individuals" (Schwartzman et al., 2000, p. 210), the main expectations of improving education and the decrease of social inequalities were placed in its process of expansion, which became the object of popular demand. In fact, as pointed out by Nunes (2000), the expansion of secondary school access in Brazil – through, for example, the opening of public middle and high schools– was the result of a pressure exerted by part of urban populations, mainly middle and working classes, organized around movements that claimed for the democratization of school. Thus, by believing that post-primary school would give better opportunities for social mobility, these groups demanded greater access to this segment, expecting to equally take advantage of the cultural goods that only the highest classes could reach, which, in turn, would allow better results in the job market.

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[5] Originated in England, within what is called "political arithmetic" (the calculation of the chances to reach several levels of the educational process that some students from different social contexts would have), some studies supported in this empirical sociological approach and that stood up in this period were the Coleman Report in the United States, in 1966, and the works conducted by the *Institut national d'études démographiques* (INED), in France. For further information, see Nogueira (1995).

This unequal distribution of schooling opportunities would be responsible, according to authors such as Oliveira and Araújo (2005), for the first dimension assumed by the idea of educational quality, focused on the perspective of *access* to school. However, it is worth mentioning that the dimension of school knowledge (analyzed later on) was always present in the discussion, since the beginning, even if implicitly. After all, as stated by Soares (2014, p. 73): "[low-income groups] demand their right to school access because they recognize that the *knowledge and abilities that dominant classes monopolize* are indispensable as instruments to fight against economic and social inequalities" (our highlight).

Nonetheless, there was a similar frustration to those seen in other countries which had bet on the potential to reduce inequality related to school expansion. Thus, the difficulties faced by the students who had recently entered to successfully continue in school originated the two other dimensions of educational quality. This, in turn, would be focused on school *flow* (the progression during the school years and levels) and students' effective *learning* during their trajectory (Oliveira & Araújo, 2005).

Several national studies, also with a macro-sociological perspective, have shown this scenario of school inequality in Brazilian context, pointing out the persistence of educational stratification despite school expansion. Silva (2003) observes, for example, the displacement of the inequality of schooling chances to higher educational levels. In her study, Fernandes (2005) points out an increase on the effect of characteristics such as race and urban or rural origin in students' educational reach throughout educational expansion. In a more recent study, Alves et al. (2016) reinforce these findings on the discussion about students' learning, when examining the inequalities between groups of students based on variables such as gender, race, and socioeconomic level, from their performance in the editions from 2005 to 2013 in *Prova Brasil*. The authors find that, despite the general improvement of indexes obtained during different evaluations, the inequality between groups not only continues, but seems to increase. Students from lower socioeconomic status (SES) can present a learning gap of two years or more, when compared with students from higher SES, studying in the same grade. When different variables are analyzed together, this gap can reach more than three years. This would be the case, for example, of black boys from low socioeconomic status, whose performance in Reading tests was significantly lower than those reached by white girls of higher SES. Similarly, black girls of low SES in Mathematics tests when compared to white boys of higher SES.

Studies such as these suggest, in the words of the own authors, that "the improvement of proficiency averages has been working as a virtuous circle only for more privileged social groups" (Alves et al., 2016, p. 49). Such conclusions reinforce the importance to pay attention to the aspects of inequality in the discussion on the quality of education, making this concept incorporate the dimension of equity. This, on its turn, as pointed out by the authors, would be related to the notion of justice, a concept whose meaning is found in permanent disputes and, when applied to the educational field, inevitably incorporates discussions on knowledge and culture. In Dubet's (2004) perspective, for instance, a fair school system (or less unfair) would be one that seeks, among other things, to protect underprivileged students, by guaranteeing them the "access to fundamental school goods" (p. 553).

In the Brazilian context, it is possible to establish parallels between this perspective and the official proposal of a curriculum framework that would establish a set of "essential learning" to be developed by all K-12 students, expressing the "educational equality over which singularities should be considered and attended" (Brasil, 2017, p.15). However, one of the main focuses of dispute and controversy lies exactly on what this "cultural minimum" would be and who would be responsible to define it, as we will explore later on.

The presented section aimed to briefly discuss how deep educational inequalities in Brazil, similar to what has taken place in other countries that expanded their educational system, gradually stopped to focus on the *access* to school and shed more light on the chances of *success* of different groups– understood as the progression throughout the system and the effective learning. Keeping a comparative effort with the international scenario, the next section discusses the studies developed in the New Sociology of Education, attempting to give meaning to the so-called "school failure" experienced by less-privileged groups. From this moment, the discussions on the character of knowledge and school culture stand out and to what measure this character would be responsible for the failure of mass schooling.

The Bourdieusian perspective and the right to equality: the problem of chosen knowledge

While the studies on stratification evidenced the social inequalities in the educational attainment from the analysis of a great set of statistical data, other theoreticians aimed to give meaning to this unveiled reality based on critical reflections of the sociology of knowledge. In this context emerged the so-called "New Sociology of Education". Initially developed in England, it had among its main assumptions the idea that the world– and, consequently, its phenomena such as education, knowledge, and curriculum itself– was a social construction.

An important milestone of this movement is the publication, in 1971, of the book *Knowledge and control: New directions for the sociology of education*, edited by Michael F. D. Young, with texts from Pierre Bourdieu and Basil Bernstein. The main criticism presented in the work was the technical conception of the curriculum, which considered it as something fixed, neutral, to which all should adapt without questioning the processes to select and transmit the knowledge it encompassed. Thus, they started to question what was being taught, why, and who had the power to define it, as these dynamics had direct implications on the exclusion of certain groups. Social stratification would be, in this sense, articulated to the stratification of knowledge, working as a way to marginalize the knowledge of working classes, and keep the power monopoly of dominant classes[6], endowed by the knowledge considered elevated and/or legitimate.

One of the main references at that moment was the Theory of Reproduction, developed mainly by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Contrary to a vision of formal education as a pathway to freedom, school institutions were conceived as an instance that reproduced pre-existing inequalities, as they would select a certain "cultural arbitrary" to compose the curriculum to be taught. The elected curriculum, which then gained legitimacy and apparent universal character, dissimulated its connection to the particular knowledge of dominant classes. The greater proximity between the culture valued in the school and that transmitted in the family milieu of students from more privileged contexts ended up favoring their school success. On

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[6] When the studies developed within the so-called "New Sociology of Education" reached the United States, the questions on these processes of selection and stratification of knowledge started to encompass other cultural dimensions beyond the reference to social class. Works such as those of Michael Apple (1982) are an important reference in this sense.

the contrary, the greater distance between school culture and the previous experiences of less-privileged children would potentialize their chances of "school failure".

To the author, however, the most effective – and possibly most perverse – way of reproducing inequalities would be beyond the selection of the curriculum. Maybe even more important than that, would be the valuing of a "natural" relation with school culture which only the "inheritors" would have, contrary to the offer of a systematic and methodical teaching of the demanded culture. In this sense, the purely formal treatment of equality that school would offer students in unequal conditions of success would conform a reproduction mechanism of the subaltern conditions of the working class and the legitimation of social inequalities that existed previous to the entrance in the educational system. In this sense, Bourdieu (2015) states: "By not providing to all, through a *methodical education*, what some owe to their family milieu, school sanctions, therefore, those *inequalities that could only be reduced by it* [our highlights] (p.68).

In this quote, the author opens a certain space for a school action that can reduce inequalities. To do so, a "rational and universal pedagogy would be necessary": a pedagogy that

> would force itself to all in favor of all and would be methodically organized having as a reference an explicit end to give all the means to acquire what is not given, under the appearance of a natural gift, except to the privileged children. (Bourdieu, 2015, p. 59)

The critical view presented by Bourdieu (2015) on school culture as composed by more "universalized" knowledge and values than "universal" in itself – considering that they start from the selection of a particular repertoire – would be resumed and developed by scholars of post-critical multiculturalism, as we will explore later. However, it is important to remember that, when referring to a methodic, rational, and universal pedagogy, the author, in a way, leaves aside the problematization of curriculum content itself and starts to focus on redistribution strategies of what would be, in the words of Soares (2014, p. 47), "the knowledge and abilities monopolized by the dominant classes".

This observation based on the classic contributions of Bourdieu is relevant for the present discussion, as the elements that support the main positions regarding the proposal of a common curriculum framework, from the most favorable to the most contrary, depend on the type of reading done on the nature of school knowledge and its transmission. For example, if the starting principle is that the knowledge and school abilities have some validation in themselves, regardless of the social origin they present, and the problem lies in their exclusive

domain by certain segments, part of the solution would be on the democratization of these contents. This perspective emphasizes the problem of inequality of access to cultural goods that should be more equally distributed among the groups and highlights the right to the equality of school opportunities for all students.

In fact, national studies conducted in the beginning of the recent discussions on the adoption of a curriculum framework that aim to map the positions on the *idea* of a framework – focused on this essay –, pointed out that the most favorable perspectives shared similar principles to those presented above. For instance, the study conducted by CENPEC[7] during the final months of 2013 and early 2014 (published in 2015) which analyzed data from interviews conducted with 103[8] agents of the educational field, among them: university professors and K-12 teachers, public school managers (municipal and state secretaries of Education) and private school managers, representatives of non-governmental organizations and associations of civil society, consultants, and unionists.

Those who are mostly in favor of the idea of a minimum or common nucleus, to be complemented in each school, highlight the understanding of the right to K-12 education as a right for all towards social integration, recognizing the debt of Brazilian society with excluded groups. Based on the principle that school would not be, in itself, an institution that inevitably reproduces inequalities, but that certain mistakes of the system would be creating a "flawed working", such flaws could be corrected from initiatives such as the creation of a well-structured curriculum. On its turn, this would be a "fundamental step to rationalize the system" (CENPEC, 2015, p. 45). Within this perspective, the access of everyone to knowledge considered key would be a way to face the strong social and school inequality in the country, contributing to the inclusion of groups socially and historically excluded. It would be the role of school, therefore, to promote a better distribution of this essential knowledge towards a project of social integration, which could be favored by a certain level of curriculum standardization. Even the presence of terms such as "rationality" and "access to all" allows the comparison between this perspective and the "rational and universal" pedagogical action mentioned by Bourdieu.

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[7] *Centro de Estudos e Pesquisas em Educação, Cultura e Ação Comunitária*

[8] According to a note in the research report, an interview was excluded from the initial sample due to "inconsistences in the answers", resulting in a total of 102 interviews analyzed (CENPEC, 2015, p.8).

According to this study, positions more in favor of the policy were mainly found among interviewees connected to the organized civil society, public educational managers, and some K-12 teachers, together with a small number of university professors. Among the latter, we can highlight, for example, the perspective of Micarello (2016) that understands the meaning and relevance of a common national curriculum framework from its role as a State public policy, which should seek to guarantee the social quality of education within a democratic society based on the law. Thus, the definition of key knowledge to which all should be able to access gains importance– to be collectively carried out among the different social actors through the weaving of understandings – together with the recognition and welcoming of diversity.

On the other hand, if the starting point of the discussion lies on the problematization of the nature of school knowledge in itself, considered only as the result of a selection of a particular repertoire, done by more influential groups, another focus of the problem is chosen and, consequently, we can foresee another type of solution. In this perspective, the adoption of a common curriculum framework could mean less an attempt to democratize opportunities and more a homogenizing strategy of cultural imposition. The next section focuses on deepening this critical perspective and its relation to more opposing positions on the BNCC proposal, using the contributions from cultural and post-critical studies in the educational field.

Multiculturalism, post-structuralism, and Education: the importance of the right to difference

In an article focused on the analysis of the tensions between equality and the difference in a world increasingly more multicultural, Candau (2008) highlights that, though the right of all human beings to equality has been mostly highlighted in modernity, there seems to be a growing claim to the right to difference, which has been called post-modernity. Despite the tendency to mark the beginning of this "contemporary condition" in the post-war period, from the 1950s, the also called liquid or fluid modernity refers more to a discontinuity in the logic of modern and illuminist thought than a temporal cut itself (Lopes, 2013). In this sense, as highlighted by the author, it is a "time to end utopias and certainties, to collapse the idea of truth centered in empirical proofs, in objectivity, in nature, or in mathematical evidence" (p. 8).

Regarding specifically education and its relation with inequality, while the modern critical perspectives bet on the unification of fights around the creation of a fairer and more egalitarian society, which also involved the emancipation of subjects through the access to knowledge that would guarantee this common project, the theories developed in post-modernity tend to take another focus. In readings frequently called post-critical and post-structuralist, such projects are considered more utopic or uncertain, in which disagreements prevail, the lack of clarity, and the multiplicity and fragmentation of identities and ideologies.

In the Brazilian context, as pointed out by Lopes (2013), post-critical theories in the field of curriculum have been present since the 1990s, based mainly on Foucauldian reflection on discourse. This perspective emphasizes the concept of reality as a construction mediated by language - understood within a post-structuralist paradigm that does not foresee a stability and a fixation of meanings previous to the signifiers, at risk of essentializing them. Therefore, these are theories that tend to privilege linguistic and identity issues and the primacy of the discourse over the structures. As seen by the same author, we can talk about a hegemony of studies that share this focus within the Work Group on Curriculum of the *Associação Nacional de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisa em Educação* (ANPEd- National Association of Post-graduation and Research in Education). Considering that this group gathers the main leaders in the curriculum field in the country, we can conclude that the post-critical perspective is currently highly legitimate in the academic field.

From the intensification of global migratory flows, there was an increasing coexistence, in the same space, of groups from different ethnical-racial, linguistic, geographic, religious belongings, among others, originating what Forquin (2000) calls "multiculturalism" in its descriptive sense. This scenario then brings the cultural issue to the center of the discussions on justice and overcoming inequalities that in a previous moment were exclusively focused on structural questions and class disputes. Beyond the influence, thus, of the theories of discourse analysis, the post-critical approaches of school knowledge have the contribution of other studies, commonly referred to under the portmanteau term "cultural studies".

One of the main premises that the anthropological and cultural studies bring to the discussions in education is the idea of cultural relativism, according to which all cultures – as systems of meanings that give sense to human action and that allow the interpretation of the action of others (Hall, 1997) – are equally legitimate. In this perspective, cultural difference is

not considered a flaw, as often happens in school, taken as an institution established in ethnocentric grounds. There would also not be hierarchies among cultures, as one culture could not be better than another.

Seeing that the cultural questions involved in the educational debate seem to emerge from their insertion in studies on multiculturalism, we present a brief summary on the polysemy of the term and some of their main understandings. Also dialoguing with Forquin (2000), previously mentioned when referring to a *descriptive* meaning of multiculturalism, it is important to highlight what the author considers to be its more *prescriptive* sense, when regarding its "enforcement" in school context. In this perspective, the author distinguishes between a differentialist multiculturalism that foresee a diversified offer of schooling possibilities for the different groups and an approach he calls "open and interactive", which presupposes the meeting, in the same school, of students with different cultural identities. While defending this last approach, the author presents a question that is on the base of another type of tension shown in the curricular debate: that between universalism and relativism.

Together with the defense of an open and interactive multiculturalism, Forquin (2000) points out the problem that the proposal shows in the pedagogical plan, related to the definition of selection criteria and the justification of teaching content. When affirming that "in fact, some things have to be taught instead of others and taught as valid to all and not only to a certain group" (p. 62), we could say that the author, though having as a theme the tensions between relativist and universalist principles in the curriculum, suggests the affirmation of a certain universalist character in school and the contents taught. These last ones would be considered, therefore, as "public knowledge", valid regardless of cultural particularities.

In a critical dialogue with the French sociologist, Brazilian authors, such as Candau (2000, 2009) and Silva (2000) questioned the own construction of the universalist character of these contents, questioning if what is taken as universal knowledge would not represent, in fact, "the universalization of particular types of knowledge, built from ethnocentric bases that believe themselves to be universality" (Candau, 2000, p. 81). They also point out that the criteria that make certain types of knowledge public and universally valid are not explicit, which refers to an essentialist view of supposedly pre-existing contents and not historically built.

This type of questioning regarding the nature of school knowledge, based on discussions raised by post-critical cultural studies, has a sociological root quite similar to Bourdieu and

grounds much of the arguments contrary to the idea of any curriculum standardization. In the analysis of this type of position, seen in the study of CENPEC (2015) previously mentioned, school is seen mainly as a place to build identities, considering the long socialization process through which students are submitted and during which they learn who they are and what their aptitudes are. In this sense, the standardized proposal of certain contents would entail their legitimation as "correct" and "natural", presupposing the existence of incorrect or worse ways of speaking and thinking. Considering that the standard in question coincides with the hegemonic knowledge and cultures of dominant groups – or that is closer to them –, a standardized curriculum could lead to the exclusion of already marginalized groups and the deepening of educational inequalities. As an alternative, the proposal is a teaching based on the local ways to produce knowledge, which shape the identity of these groups.

According to CENPEC mapping, the positions against the adoption of a common curriculum framework were predominantly found within the interviewees connected to the academic world– important research grantees, members of committees to evaluate courses, members of the National Education Council at the time, amongst others–, who have a considerable influence and legitimacy to form opinions related to the curriculum issue. Thus, the results found match the hegemony of the post-critical approach in the academic field focused on the curriculum studies in the country, as previously mentioned by Lopes (2013). Therefore, it is important to recognize that positions contrary to the common framework, regardless of the shape of the policy in its different versions, have been prevalent in the academy since the beginning of the discussions. In this sense, we can highlight, for example, the perspective of Süssekind (2014), according to which the content standardization nation-wide creates an "abyssal line" regarding the previous curricula in the schools, conceived and implemented by the teachers from their experiences and that are invisibilized and excluded. Besides this, for this author, the teachers are submitted to a State control that removes their professional autonomy, a concern also raised by other actors contrary to BNCC, such as *the Sindicato Nacional dos Docentes das Instituições de Ensino Superior* (ANDES-SN) and the *Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores em Educação* (CNTE).

We could say then that despite the approximation with Bourdiesian sociology regarding the criticism towards the universalized (and not universal) character of school curriculum, the perspective that emphasizes the right to difference and cultural diversity could hardly share the same implicit solution of the first. In other words, a "rational and universal pedagogy" that

foresees compensatory actions to guarantee the access of all students to "what is not given…except to the children of privileged classes" (Bourdieu, 2015, p. 59) could be considered less as a measure to promote equality and more an assimilationist strategy. This, according to Candau (2009), would be identified in policies that favor the incorporation of cultural groups that are in disadvantage in the current society, without effectively criticizing or changing its monocultural character (present, for instance, in school curricula). This position, also identified by McLaren (1997) as "conservative multiculturalism", would defend the construction of a common culture, of universal aspirations, that would end up delegitimizing other types of knowledge, beliefs, and values. As already suggested here, the contrary positions towards the adoption of a curriculum framework tend to exactly criticize the assimilationist logic underlying this proposal.

Between this logic and that called differentialist by Candau (2009) – in which the recognition of difference can end up promoting an essentialist and static perception of cultural identity, leading to a *sociocultural apartheid* –, the author positions herself as seeking a third way, which she calls interculturality and considers an approach that seeks to promote an inter-relation among different groups, breaking away from differentialist views of cultures, as well as from an assimilationist perspective that does not encompass the richness of differences. Privileging processes of destabilization, reconstruction, and cultural hybridism, without overlooking the asymmetries of power involved in *intra* and *inter* cultural relations, the intercultural perspective would try to break away with the tension of equality-difference and relativism-universalism. To do so, it would promote an education for the negation between cultures, aiming to build a common project, that fights against discrimination forms, but that does not exempt the recognition of the right to difference. In this perspective, we can say less about "universal" values and knowledge and more about "common" or "transcultural" knowledge, which would be reached through an intercultural dialogue.

The reflections raised up to here allow some initial considerations and the creation of ulterior questions. Based on the "diagnostic" drawn in this first section, it is possible to conclude that the historical inequality observed in the apprehension of school knowledge lingers until now. Such inequalities are social, as certain groups– and not individuals randomly distributed among the groups– have more difficulties to apprehend these types of knowledge, at least when dealing with performance in large scale assessments. Such evaluations, though indubitably

limited in their capacity to diagnose the situation of Brazilian education, say something about this topic.

This finding opened space for different questions and points of view of what would be the origin of the problem: on the contents themselves, which should be questioned as particularly ethnocentric knowledge that do not make sense to all students; or, yet, the monopolization of these contents that should be democratized by having some intrinsic value. The previous section sought to deal with some of these questions under the light of different theoretical assumptions.

From the questioning of different perspectives, however, seem to arise other reflexive unfoldings. For instance, to what extent would school knowledge establish, in fact, the universalization of particularities? Which part of it would establish valid transcultural knowledge that could justify a public policy for its guarantee? When adopting an intercultural perspective of education, how would it be possible to build a common project? How to reach the implementation of such a project, even if temporary, through a common framework that equalizes the right to equality and to difference? Who should participate, in the field of cultural negotiation, of the processes to define this knowledge – specialists, teachers, the students themselves from their interests?

The next section aims to shed light on some of these questions, from the reference of another right to which students should have access and that would be strictly related to the discussions on school and curriculum: the right to knowledge.

Michael Young's approach and the right to the "powerful" knowledge: a discussion to be revisited in times of "post-truth"

As briefly discussed in the second section of this essay, the contributions brought by the New Sociology of Education in England since the 1960s and 1970s are commonly perceived as the beginning of the critical theories that abandoned a technical, rigid, and merely instructive conception of the curriculum, and started to refocus the field by making explicit the power relations involved in the process of selection and transmission of school knowledge. In this way, we start to observe an increasingly higher number of works committed to identify a hidden

curriculum, the so-called "knowledge of the powerful" – those able to impose their interests and ideologies through mass schooling, and thus keeping the structure of inequalities unchanged. One of the main authors at the time, which pointed out the social base to produce knowledge, was Michael F. D. Young, editor of the aforementioned work, which would become a milestone of this movement (*Knowledge and Control*, published in 1971).

As explored in the third section, this perspective was deepened within the post-critical theories that complexified the analysis from the centrality of the cultural issue and the approaches focused on the discourse. In the so-called post-modernity, the idea that there would be no truth or a transcontextual validity of statements gained more strength. The plausibility of epistemologies are *only* a reflection of their belonging to specific communities (Bourdieu, 2000, quoted by Valle, 2014, p. 73). As pointed out by Lopes (2013, p. 16), concepts such as reason and truth are in crisis and the "only consensus between the post-moderns is that there is no possibility of consensus, there is no final authority", it seems that there "are no longer principles that can act as criteria of transcendental universal values to anything".

It is amidst this context of "crisis" that Michael Young (2009, 2013) develops his most recent productions, initially inserted in the tradition of the New Sociology of Education. When discussing what should be the center of concerns of the curriculum theory, the author has presented a theoretical repositioning and proposed that the focus on the so-called "knowledge *of the powerful*" should be conjugated with the adoption of a perspective focused on what would be the "*powerful* knowledge", which students would have the *right* to access. In other worlds, beyond the focus on those making the decisions about the curriculum, the author affirms the importance of seeing knowledge itself and questions in what way it can incorporate information that would be powerful for young people to acquire, in the sense of broadening their possibilities to interpret and act in the world.

Recognizing the importance of critical studies, to which he, himself, contributed, the author highlights that restricting the perspective to those with power to define the curriculum created a negligence related to a reality– the extent to which some types of knowledge can be effectively able to empower those who have access to them, within a certain sociopolitical conjecture:

> The focus on the "*knowledge of the powerful*", despite its strong points, almost inevitably displaces the analysis from what goes on in school to what is happening with the distribution of power in society in general and offers little to teachers and social movements that seek a more equitable approach of curriculum (Young, 2013, p. 230, Original highlight).

Summing up, the author believes that the change of the technical model towards a critical ideology has been followed by a progressive loss of the key object of the theory of curriculum, that is, what is taught and learnt in school. This process could be used to endorse the smaller attention that governments and makers of curriculum policies have been giving to the theoreticians as specialists in the area, considering that their investigation efforts would be centered in the critical analysis of the interests and the power relations behind the definitions established in these instances, and not on the criteria that should guide them. On its turn, the definition task would be increasingly more understood as an exclusive assignment of school communities based on local contexts, under the danger of representing external cultural impositions.

To Young (2013), though it would be fundamental to question the origin of a certain knowledge, to only consider the curriculum as an imposition of a cultural arbitrary does not promote, on itself, an advancement of curriculum alternatives. The author is also concerned with what he considers to be an idea increasingly more accepted by part of the researchers in the educational field: that the knowledge has no meaning or validity that are intrinsic to it. From this perspective could result in a limitation of teachers' reflection to the question: "does this curriculum make sense to my students?" ignoring the question on the senses that could be opened to the students from a certain curriculum. In other words, in what measure a curriculum could take them *beyond* their own particular existence, which needs to be valued and considered – mainly as the starting point of didactic mediations –, but that should not be the only arrival point. His main conclusion, therefore, would be that school education has as its main objective to guarantee the access of students to the "best"[9] historically built knowledge so far, so as to enable them to build new knowledge. Though recognizing the difficulty to define such an object

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[9] In this text, when we use the words "best" and "better" connected to knowledge, we use quotation marks, to avoid (and refute) an ethnocentric reading that certain cultures and knowledge would be superior to others. As discussed in this section, the concept refers to the advancement, in each area of studies, to seek more reliable scientific knowledge, that live up to reality (or the multiple realities). Though we recognize the density of the epistemological discussion on what is "truth", which surpasses the scope of this work, we also show a certain concern with the risks that an era of "post-truth" can bring, when completely ignoring the scientific commitment (to produce knowledge)of what is true – even if always approximately and permeated by subjectivities–, appealing only to individual beliefs and values or, even, to false information.

and the need of constant renovation, the author points out the importance of not escaping this debate.

In the attempt to draw his curriculum approach, the author indicates that in every research field there would be a knowledge considered "better", in the sense of being more reliable and close to the truth of the world we live, even if always fallible and possible to be challenged. To this knowledge, the author calls the "powerful knowledge", whose main characteristics would be the fact that it is specialized – for example, produced and disseminated in schools and universities – and goes *beyond* the experiences students take to school, without ignoring or underestimating them. Though it is not general knowledge (or "universal" to make a parallel with the previous discussion), it would have some ability to transcend particular contexts.

When referring to main objections to his approach, Young (2013) highlights those of epistemological and political character enacted by academics that defend theories of post-modern and post-structuralist knowledge. In this perspective, every knowledge has a point of view, so that the identification of one of them as "powerful" practically induces the acceptance of hegemonic rules of knowledge. If every knowledge is considered arbitrary, an approach such as that proposal could be only ideological, and could be resumed to the imposition of specific interests– for example, different from students' interests and preferences, which would establish an equally valid curriculum criterion within this perspective.

The author reinforces that the radically relativist argument that there is no knowledge that is the right to all students (and that, therefore, should be democratized) reduces the theory of the curriculum only to its place of criticism. While starting from the principle that the curriculum is not able to reduce alone the social inequalities– what would be a broader political task and not only educational–, Young (2013) believes that it is up to the theoreticians in the field the effort to develop curriculum principles that potentialize the chances of all students to access the "best" (in the previously presented sense) knowledge available in any area they are interested.

As the own author recognizes, the premise that the knowledge and the curriculum are the result of a social construction always compromises, in a certain measure, its objective to reach the "truth". However, though continuing to share this perspective, he affirms that the socially built character of school knowledge does not prevent a critical reflection on the levels

of legitimacy also historically attributed to it– which would no longer *uniquely and exclusively* represent an imposition of particular arbitraries (Galian & Louzano, 2014). To Young (2013), thus, this scenario of "crisis" around the theories of curriculum would have been drawn from the neglect of their main role, given the main focus on the power of who defines the knowledge, and the reluctance to contemplate themes of epistemological character that lean on the questions of truth and reliability of several forms of knowledge. However, if the own specialists in the field themselves believe that it is not possible to build any consensus regarding the knowledge that every student should be able to develop in school – an idea that grounds BNCC, for example–, the author fears that the answer would be relegated to the pragmatic and ideological decisions taken by managers, politicians, and other interested groups.

In a brief comparison with the Brazilian context, we can say that many critical arguments against BNCC in the educational academic field are based on the low level of legitimacy given to those who assume the protagonism in the mobilization process to build a national curriculum policy, that is, those "behind the definitions". An example of these authors would be the so-called "education entrepreneurial reformists" (Freitas, 2014) identified in the companies, institutions, and private foundations connected to the educational sector that perceive it as a potentially lucrative market. As pointed out by several studies (Avelar & Ball, 2017; Costa, 2018), the groups in favor of the idea of a common curriculum framework have sought to articulate since the beginning of the discussions around it, aiming to guarantee the establishment of the policy in the governmental agenda. Regarding specifically the formulation of the official text, we can see that these same groups assumed an important place in the elaboration of its last version, enacted after the profound political crisis in the country which culminated with the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff[10]. However, it is worth highlighting that the position contrary to a common framework, adopted by most researchers in the field of curriculum, was not restricted to that moment, as previously seen, but since the beginning of the debates on the proposal. Despite not being the focus of this work, the observation of these dynamics allows the development of future reflections as to how the positions assumed by the academic

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[10] Even if the analysis of policy texts extrapolates the objective of this essay, we highlight that the third version of the framework, later approved, brought significant changes regarding the principles that have guided the previous versions, submitted to a broad consultation process. The guidance based on "learning objectives and rights" was then substituted for the organization around competencies and abilities, increasing even more the rejection towards the policy, considered that it is a proposal that has been criticized since the 1990s, associated to the neoliberalism in the educational reforms. About this, see for example Ramos (2016).

community on such policies reverberate on the participation margin that the other groups find in this process, often guided by other interests, not necessarily educational ones.

Finally, understanding that the widening of educational opportunities takes place from the reduction of inequalities on the distribution of resources allows us to get closer to Young's (2013) perspective on the premise that school inequalities would also be related to the persistent monopoly of certain "powerful" knowledge by specific groups and not simply to a restricted relevance of this knowledge to these groups. The author concludes signaling that a better curriculum would continue to be the highest priority, as the "fight for education was always a fight for knowledge– and this should be the focus of the current curriculum debate" (p. 244).

It is important to highlight that Young's perspective does not represent the definite overcoming of what was called a "crisis" in the studies on curriculum, in the sense of closing the issue on the definition of school knowledge. Neither would this approach be immune to criticisms in the national context, as those presented by Zanardi (2013), which explored more deeply other ideas of the author, such as the defense of the centrality of subjects and its distance from everyday experience. We also do not seek to defend in this essay the idea that the "powerful knowledge" would not be permeated by culture, establishing a type of neutral, sterile, and ahistorical knowledge.

The option to revisit his contributions – as well as the classic sociological theories that articulate schooling, inequality, and knowledge– represents primarily a movement to return "to the framework of the Framework", in the attempt to better understand the controversies that have marked the formulation of a policy that establishes common knowledge to be guaranteed to all in a socially unequal and culturally diverse country as is Brazil. Such controversies now tend to be rekindled in the schools, during its implementation – understood here as a critical and creative process, which involves text translation, interpretation, and (re)signification, and not merely its execution. In this sense, it is important to also highlight that the previously mentioned inequalities also extend to the effective conditions that different schools and educational systems have at their disposal to enact a policy such as BNCC. Depending on the structure that the different systems have, there is the risk of observing a passage from the minimum to the maximum, that is, a return to a technical and mechanical model of instruction that seeks to "accomplish the contents".

In the second place and regarding the specific contributions of Young, we believe that the debate on the existence of 'powerful knowledge' finds fertile ground in the present historical moment. When writing this essay, we find ourselves in the middle of the greatest pandemic experienced in the last century that, besides the deep collective grief caused by the enormous number of human losses – also trespassed by social, ethnical-racial, and gender inequalities–, is aggravated in the country by a strong political and scientific crisis. We highlight, in this sense, the weakening of the legitimacy given to the authority and the knowledge of experts, the denial (or attempt to hide) evidences pointed out by scientific studies developed with methodological rigor and a considerable dissemination of fake news or information weakly based on reality.

Amidst a scenario that has been progressively understood from the idea of "post-truth" (McIntyre, 2018), we should reflect on what would be the "powerful knowledge", specialized, reliable, developed by diverse, plural, and multicultural scientific communities around the world and that should, therefore, be made accessible to *all* – so as to allow the identification and rebuttal of guesses, the false information, and denialism. We are possibly in a moment when there is the need to rescue and establish again (even if provisionally and always critically) some senses that have been shaken during post-modernity, as the idea of fact, truth, science, and evidence. It is worth then to rethink the role that school assumes in this sense, as a place that has as one of its obligatory roles to "teach knowledge" and is also the space of research and cultural criticism (Moreira, 2012).

Final remarks

The present work started from the deep disagreements around the recent policy that foresees a national curriculum framework for Brazilian schools. Without analyzing the official text of the policy, the focus chosen were some tensions that underlined the own idea of a common base, regardless of the shape of its final version. Though we recognize that the discussion gained even more complex contours when discussing the specific framework approved, we think it is important to explore some founding aspects of the debate, in the attempt to see if there is a minimum consensus on the idea of *any* framework. This movement is particularly interesting as the controversies and disputes that characterized the trajectory of the policy are rekindled in the moment of its implementation.

To do so, we chose the perspective of rights – articulated to the conception of school knowledge– as the focus of the dispute that trespasses the whole discussion on the relevance and the possibilities of a common framework and its effect to reproduce or reduce inequalities. The starting point was the scenario of educational inequalities that characterize Brazilian reality, mainly regarding the distinctive levels in which different social groups seem to be able to appropriate school knowledge. From this finding, we tried to analyze the different perspectives developed to give meaning to this framework and the solutions implicit to them, especially regarding the curriculum issue.

We observed, on one hand, the idea that one of the main causes of inequalities would be the ill-distribution of school resources– among which knowledge itself and school culture – that should be democratized to guarantee greater social justice. In this sense, the guarantee of a minimal content to be taught to all, regardless of their social origin, would be a relevant initiative. On the other hand, when locating the cause of inequalities in the nature of school knowledge itself, which would not have a universal value but particular to a certain culture, more critical perspectives emphasized the questions on who would define the curriculum content, at the expense of the form these contents could assume, considering its potentially contingent character. The proposal of a common framework to all students should sound, in this perspective, as an assimilationist and homogenizing strategy.

Finally, we refer to the proposal of Michael Young on a curriculum approach based on the right of students to the knowledge taken as "powerful" that would seek to rescue the commitment of curriculum studies with what is taught in school, beyond those who define it. To the author, the access democratization of what would be the "best" knowledge in each area is no longer an epistemological issue but also a factor of social justice, considering that the disputes of low-income classes to access school have historically represented a fight to access knowledge.

Regarding some parallels we can draw with the Brazilian case, we highlight the reflection on the extension that the debates on the curriculum and the curriculum framework have privileged the issue of knowledge itself, beyond the (fundamental) criticism of the agents behind this process. It is not about ignoring the importance to unveil several interests that grounds a national policy and that involves extremely meaningful economic dimensions. However, we must be aware of the risks we might observe in a phenomenon similar to that called by Young

(2013) of negligence towards the issue of knowledge in the debates on curriculum policy. A question that is even more urgent in times of scientific denialism.

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