Curriculum making on the edge of Europe in the age of globalization: two alternative scenarios

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Introduction

My purpose in this article is to discuss some possible implications of the peripheral position of the region where I live – The Azores, Portugal – for curriculum construction. In this discussion, I shall consider, with special emphasis, the current debates on globalization, and also the fact that the regional government of the Azores has recently started to design a regional curriculum for basic education (grades 1 through 9).

Geographically, the Azores are a group of nine small islands located in the eastern half of the Atlantic Ocean, quite isolated from Continental Europe (760 nautical miles from Lisbon and 2,111 from New York City), with a population of about 240,000 inhabitants. Politically, they are an autonomous region of Portugal and an ultra-peripheral region of the European Union. Given these geographic characteristics and this political status, the Azores are hardly visible at the national and at the international levels. Many people do not even know that the islands exist, and some people have a very inaccurate idea of their characteristics.

In order to start a discussion on curricular implications of this invisibility in the age of globalization, it is useful to read Noel Gough's (2002) reflections on a special series of articles on globalization – entitled 'One world, ready or not?' – published in 1999 by the Australian newspaper *The Age*. The announcement of the series was illustrated with a drawing of a globe positioned in such a way that Asia occupied the central part of the image, Europe and North America were quite visible, and other parts of the planet – like South America – were out of sight. According to Gough (2002), 'one reading of this image is that the question of being 'ready or not' to belong to 'one world' is most pertinent to nations that are visible from this standpoint' (p. 170).

The Azores are also absent from many graphic representations of the earth. This absence results not only from perspective but also from scale. Even when the Atlantic Ocean is depicted, the Azores – given their small size – are simply invisible at the scales used in many graphic representations of our planet. In addition, language used in the media and in many popular discourses frequently conveys some disregard for the Azores, by failing to represent the whole Portuguese territory with accuracy, as if some of its parts did not exist. At the time of writing this article, I can find many instances of this phenomenon through a simple Internet search. For example, a website for tourists[1] – linked to a travel publishing group supported by the Portuguese Hotel Association and by the Portuguese Institute of Tourism – states that 'the peak of Serra da Estrela is the highest point in Portugal,' which is inaccurate, since the highest point in Portugal is Pico mountain, in the Azores.[2] Among many other problematic texts in terms of geography, a text written on the website of a professional school of agriculture[3]

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[1] http://www.portugaltravelguide.com/pt/beiras
[2] Pico mountain is 2,351 meters high, whereas Serra da Estrela is 1,993 meters high.
[3] http://www.epafbl.edu.pt

states that the school is located 'in the western region of Portugal.' By reading the text, one realizes that what the authors mean by 'western region of Portugal' is a given area on the western coast of continental Portugal, as if there were no more Portuguese territory to the west, namely the Azores Islands.

Such lack of accuracy is not absent from textbooks and other curricular materials. Although materials of this kind have increasingly become more accurate and respectful of all the Portuguese regions, one can still find some counter-examples of this tendency. At least two recent textbooks for the 4th grade (Aguiar, 2006; Rodrigues, 2006) present a wrong description of the political organization of the Azores, by stating that the region is divided into three districts, which has not been true since the 1970s. According to an exercise book for 5th grade students of history and geography (Costa & Marques, 2006), published by one of the leading publishing companies in Portugal, the Azores were named after a marine bird called the goshawk (*Accipiter gentiles*). Indeed, historians usually accept that the Azores were named after the goshawk ('açor,' in Portuguese language). But taxonomists do not classify goshawks as marine birds. That specific part of the exercise book is not accurately written and one does not easily find such lack of accuracy when central parts of the territory are concerned.

What implications should the marginal position of the Azores – illustrated by the examples that I have just presented – have in terms of the construction of a regional curriculum? In this article, I shall not provide a definite answer to this question, but I will discuss two alternative possibilities (two among many possible scenarios) for the construction of a regional curriculum that takes that position into consideration.

The regional curriculum of the Azores

In order to discuss the curricular implications of the marginal position occupied by the Azores at the national and international levels in the age of globalization, it is important to consider the formal structure of curriculum decision making in that region. Until recently, the specific characteristics of the Azores had not been reflected in the design of the formal curriculum. Given the traditionally centralized character of curriculum decision making in Portugal, the official curriculum used to be exactly the same in the whole Portuguese territory, including the autonomous regions of Azores and Madeira. But recently the regional government of the Azores took the initiative of creating a regional curriculum for basic education (grades 1 through 9) that is subsidiary to the national curriculum.

The concept of regional curriculum was introduced in the Azorean educational policy via Regional Decree number 15/2001/A. In this official document, the regional curriculum of the Azores is defined as follows:

> For the purpose of this document, the regional curriculum should be understood as the content to be learnt and the competencies to be developed by students on the basis of the geographical, economical, cultural, political, and administrative characteristics of the Azores.

The construction of the regional curriculum has been, to some extent, open to public debate. Accordingly, in September 2003, the regional government organized a seminar on this topic and, since then, has consulted with leaders of teachers' unions, scholars, and other stakeholders.

In 2004, another important step was taken in terms of the construction of a regional curriculum in the Azores, with the publication of Resolution number 124/2004, through which

a set of curricular competencies was officially approved. According to this document, the regional curriculum of the Azores is legitimized by the following principles:

    a. inclusive education, which supports the adaptation of school to all the students and to every kind of cultural diversity;

    b. project-based rationality, according to which curriculum is permanently reconstructed and negotiated by all the actors involved;

    c. curriculum differentiation, which requires a critical attitude and a broad conception of teachers' professionalism.

    d. meaningful learning, which requires the exploration of the cultural contexts of the student as important resources in terms of meaning.

Alternative scenarios for the ongoing construction of a regional curriculum

Living and studying in a region like the Azores can be considered a way of being different from students who live elsewhere. In other words, it can be considered a source of identity. Accordingly, one may discuss forms of curriculum differentiation that take that kind of difference into consideration.

By curriculum differentiation, I mean the adaptation of curriculum to each student's characteristics, in order to maximize the student's opportunities to succeed in school. It is a concept of curriculum differentiation based on inclusive principles. In the light of those principles, 'to differentiate is to define different paths – but it cannot ever be the establishment of different levels of arrival due to different departing conditions' (Roldão, 1999, p. 53). Therefore, the kind of curriculum differentiation that I refer to in this article is not synonymous with tracking, ability grouping, and similar mechanisms. Mechanisms of this kind have been associated with an idea of curriculum differentiation as a device that necessarily leads to academic and social stratification. As Oakes, Gamoran, and Page (1992) acknowledge, 'with tracking, educators prejudge how much children will benefit, with the result that some children are not taught knowledge that provides access to future academic and social opportunity' (p. 597). This idea of curriculum differentiation as provision of alternative paths of study, some of which are more socially prestigious than others, has deep historical roots, as Apple (1990), Kliebard (1995), and Deschenes, Cuban, and Tyack (2001) note with regard to North America and Goodson (1995) notes with regard to the UK. Apple (1990), for example, states that the thought of Franklin Bobbitt and other pioneers of curriculum studies in the U.S.A. at the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century was dominated by an idea that is still very influential nowadays – the idea that 'the curriculum needed to be differentiated to prepare individuals of different intelligence and ability for a variety of different but specific adult life functions' (p. 95). The pervasive dominance of stratified forms of curriculum differentiation notwithstanding, it is possible to differentiate the curriculum without stratifying it at the outset, by spending more time and energy with diagnostic and formative assessment, in order to get to know students well and adapt curriculum to their characteristics; by dignifying a wide range of ways of addressing reality, knowing, and solving problems; by practicing differentiation preferably through the adjustment of teaching strategies, considering differentiation of objectives only as a last resort option, in order not to jeopardize the pursuit of the highest standards for every student as long as that it feasible.

Living in the Azores may, thus, be considered one among many reasons why curriculum differentiation should be practiced and the regional curriculum may become one among many instruments of curriculum differentiation.

To what extent does it make sense, in the age of globalization, to construct a curriculum that takes the specific characteristics of a given region into special consideration? According to Smith (2003):

> human self-understanding is now increasingly lived out in a tension between the local and the global, between my understanding of myself as a person of this place and my emerging yet profound awareness that this place participates in a reality heavily influenced by, and implicated in, larger pictures. (p. 36)

In order to seriously discuss the relationship between curricular regionalism and globalization in the Azores, it is not enough to suggest the cliché 'glocal' to characterize the curriculum that is being constructed in the region. One possible way of engaging in a deeper discussion of this issue consists of exploring a kind of discourse that helps us map the aspects of identity that result from living in the Azores in the complex web of identities and differences that frames relationships between human beings in general and students in particular. The 'grammar of difference' proposed by Burbules (1997) may be helpful in this exploration.

Since one's approach to curriculum differentiation is related to one's conceptualization of difference among students, I will now discuss two alternative ways of viewing difference in school in the light of Burbules's 'grammar of difference': the categorical approach and the non-categorical approach. This discussion will include both an overview of these two approaches and specific references to the regional curriculum of the Azores. Firstly, I will briefly characterize the categorical approach, then I will summarize some of the criticism that has been made of this kind of approach and, finally, I will tackle some possible starting points for the construction of a non-categorical approach.

Categorical approach

Viewing difference through the lens of a categorical approach implies organizing one's thinking about difference by classifying individuals into categories or taxonomies. Accordingly, this kind of approach usually includes (1) the selection of a dimension of difference that is considered relevant – for example, religion, gender, or race – and (2) the distribution of individuals among categories within the selected dimension – for example, 'Jew,' 'Christian,' 'Muslim.'

The categorical approach is often associated to advocacy of the rights of given minorities or groups that are somehow considered oppressed. Accordingly, special attention is paid to a given dimension of difference and special efforts are often made in order to serve the interests of people who belong to a given category within that same dimension. Let us consider, for example, differences in terms of gender. More than one hundred years ago, John Dewey (1902) wrote that

> what we need is something which will enable us to interpret, to appraise, the elements in the child's present puttings forth and fallings away, *his* exhibitions of power and weakness, in the light of some larger growth-process in which they have their place. (p. 19; my emphasis)

In 1902, using the masculine pronouns *he* or *his* to refer to both sexes was not considered to be problematic. Nowadays, a sentence like the one quoted above would be considered by most reviewers of academic manuscripts as an instance of sexist bias and, therefore, would have to be changed into a gender-inclusive version in order to be published. This move towards language that is more accurate and respectful in terms of gender has been supported and consolidated by many individuals and groups, some of which (e.g., feminist scholars)

have played a specially relevant role in emphasizing gender as a dimension that must be considered when difference and respect for difference are at issue.

Curriculum theory and development, as a field of scholarship, has accompanied this move towards unbiased discourses and practices in terms of gender and beyond. Noticeably, there are many texts discussing curricular implications of gender (Fonseca, 2000; Louro, 2000; Munro, 1998), as well as many texts on curriculum theory and multicultural education (Gay, 1995; Gimeno Sacristán, 1999; Leite, 2000, 2002), curriculum and Special Educational Needs (Moreira & Baumel, 2002), curriculum aligned with multiple intelligences and learning styles (Silver, Strong, & Perini, 2000), and so on. These crossings between curriculum theory and other sub-fields within educational theory have been made in the context of a phenomenon whereby various dimensions of difference that operate in educational settings have become the objects of study of academic specialisms, such as multicultural education, education of students with Special Educational Needs, and gifted education. These fields have produced discourses that naturally tend to be focused on specific aspects of difference, although they are sometimes extended to difference at large and in some cases are used to claim some leadership in the construction of innovative approaches to difference in general.

The construction of a regional curriculum in the Azores can possibly follow a similar kind of logic, that is, emphasizing a relevant dimension of difference – the condition of living in a given geographical location with particular characteristics – and then constructing a discourse that respectfully considers students affected by that same dimension. Through this kind of approach, the school curriculum is supposed to be designed with a very special attention to the characteristics of Azorean students. Inside and outside schools, supporters of this kind of approach are expected to press authors of every kind of text to change sentences like 'the peak of Serra da Estrela is the highest point in Portugal,' into 'the peak of Serra da Estrela is the highest point in continental Portugal,' or 'the peak of Pico mountain is the highest point in Portugal,' just like authors have been pressed – in given situations – to write, for example, 'he or she' instead of 'he' in order to avoid sexist bias.

Criticism of the categorical approach

Burbules (1997) criticizes categorical approaches to difference by highlighting the unstable nature of categories, which is ensured by (1) the existence of differences that escape our capabilities of understanding, constituting a mysterious alterity, one that cannot be explained through the grids that we normally use to interpret reality; (2) the invocation of differences with the aim of affirming identity not only through what one is but also through what one is not; [4] (3) the assertion of difference as resistance to totalitarian processes (the system of categories that is legitimized by the totalizer is naturally different from the system of categories that those who resist totalization hold as a reference).

The use of a categorical approach may become particularly problematic when taxonomies of categories are expanded to very specific levels. To speak about the specific characteristics of the Azores may sound too generalist in given contexts, because, for example, living in S. Miguel Island is quite different from living in Corvo Island, and, within S. Miguel Island, living in Ponta Delgada is quite different from living in Nordeste. By dividing categories into multiple levels of sub-categories, one could possibly be more respectful of certain specificities, but such a procedure would certainly yield a very fragmented taxonomy, one that would not be helpful for those who deal with student diversity in schools daily. Hybridism and border crossing also pose difficulties to categorical approaches. One may live

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[4]   As an example of this, Burbules mentions the assertion of heterosexual identities through anxiety or hostility toward homosexuality.

in the Azores after having lived elsewhere for many years, thus receiving contributions from different geographic and cultural settings to the construction of one's identity. In addition, 'multiple dimensions of difference are always acting simultaneously' (Burbules, 1997, p. 101). Nobody is simply Azorean, white, homosexual, or Muslim.

Discourses about difference that are restricted to a categorical rationality tend to reification, which hinders the perception of the dynamic nature of difference, by freezing systems of classification and thus making them static, context-independent, and hence deprived of the flexibility that would allow them to accommodate, at any time, any instance of difference. The same issue has been discussed in terms of identity, via criticism of essentialist perspectives, which view identity as a static description because they do not acknowledge that it involves performativity. As Silva (2000, pp. 92-96) puts it, identity entails performativity and is thus more related to the process of 'becoming' than it is to the state of 'being.' The concept of performativity, as developed by Butler (1993), is grounded in the acknowledgement that identities are not only transformed but also of the role that certain discursive acts play in such transformation. Thus, the propositions 'the meeting is closed' and 'I pronounce you husband and wife' are clearly performative, to the extent that they are considered necessary in order for certain things to occur. The proposition 'John has low intelligence' seems descriptive, but, as Silva (2000, p. 93) explains, may function as performative, since its repetition may end up by producing the 'fact' that it was only supposed to describe. Likewise, the proposition 'the peak of Serra da Estrela is the highest point in Portugal' seems descriptive but may function as performative, since its repetition produces in many people's minds a subjective reality that obfuscates the objective reality. Problems of this kind can only be addressed by curricula that acknowledge performativity and help the students study how it operates. If we want our specific characteristics to be respected, we cannot simply tell the students who we (students included) are. We also need to help them discuss others' discourses about us.

The simplification of reality that is conveyed by reified sorting systems obscures not only the processes through which identities and differences are constructed but also the least visible aspects of that same reality. Those systems capture the most outstanding aspects of difference, to the neglect of less visible differences, which are often excluded from official discourses, although they may be significant from the standpoint of those who experience them. Indeed, many discourses about difference are focused on highly visible instances of difference (related to dimensions like race and gender, for example) and, through a rhetoric that emphasizes advocacy of minorities, end up by privileging the majority among the minority. In order to get a more concrete idea about this tendency, one need only search a library or a database for texts about the education of ethnic minorities and/or groups of immigrants in the U.S.A. and then compare, for example, the quantity of available references about Chinese or Mexicans with the quantity of available references about Greeks or Portuguese. Quantity and visibility may also be sources of power (although there is not a linear relationship between the size of a population and its power), which means that certain groups that are insistently presented as oppressed minorities may be, after all, relatively well positioned in the web of power relations, if compared to those who belong to minorities that are so small that they become invisible. Certain groups have the power to assert their claims by organizing social movements – like the civil rights movement that took place in the U.S.A. in the 1960s – or, at least, parades in big cities, which are not accessible to a few students who live in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. This should make us question the usefulness of a categorical approach to the construction of a regional curriculum in the Azores. One of the main reasons why the struggle for a more respectful language and for a more inclusive curriculum in terms of gender has been relatively successful is that roughly 50 % of the world's population is female. Since only 0.004 % of the world's population live in the Azores,

it would be frustrating to concentrate one's efforts in a specific and direct struggle for a worldwide acknowledgement of that region.

Non-categorical approach

In his discussion of alternative approaches to difference, Burbules (1997) states:

> A very different way to think about difference is to begin with the continuous, the blurry, the unstable, and try to develop a language that allows us to make particular distinctions and to offer explanations without reifying our working concepts into categories or typologies. (p. 102)

How can the construction of a regional curriculum in the Azores begin with the continuous and the blurry? This alternative approach may involve, for example, readiness to avoid overemphasizing the aspects of the students' identities that result from their living in the Azores, that is, to avoid using them as the exclusive pillars of the curriculum, thus neglecting other relevant aspects of the students' identities.

The official discourse conveyed by Regional Decree number 15/2001/A, and by subsequent preparatory documents that were submitted to consultants for analysis and comment, puts a strong emphasis upon an idea of regional curriculum as a contribution to the consolidation of the political autonomy of the Azores. As a consultant to the regional government, I wrote a position paper in which I suggested that the regional curriculum could be conceptualized from a less instrumental perspective, without abandoning a legitimate concern for knowledge about the specific characteristics of the Azores and its translation into the curriculum. Accordingly, significance of content to the students would be a major criterion in decisions about what to include in the curriculum, since the (lack of) relevance or meaningfulness is, after all, one of the main problems of school culture nowadays, as advocated by Esteve (2000), who states:

> it makes absolutely no sense for an educated 21st-century man or woman to study three years of physics and, at the same time, to use telephones, computers and televisions every day without having even the vaguest idea of how they work. (p. 9)

Learning specifically about the Azores or learning about more universal realities through resources available in the Azores may indeed contribute to making the curriculum more significant, but that is not enough, for several reasons. A great portion of what students should learn in school can hardly be approached from a regional point of view. Obviously, students have to learn much beyond the geographical boundaries of the place where they live in order to avoid provincialism. Moreover, there are many other sources of significant learning that may be used more effectively in many situations. In fact, students do not necessarily view phenomena that are physically close to them as more significant than distant phenomena (Roldão, 1994, p. 7). Exotic and imaginary realities have always played an important role in shaping children's and young people's experiences. Finally, nowadays our virtual geography – 'the terrain created by the television, the telephone, the telecommunications networks crisscrossing the globe' (Wark, 1994, p. vii) – is at least as influential as local geography in shaping experience.

The discourse conveyed by Resolution number 124/2004 puts much more emphasis on the idea of meaningful learning at large than the prior documents.

Since, according to the official documents, the regional curriculum of the Azores is based on competencies, 'to begin with the continuous' would certainly imply viewing the set of competencies as a continuum, extending from a local focus to a global one. Instead, the

preparatory documents mix competencies that are clearly focused on regional realities – such as 'to use scientific and technological knowledge to understand natural phenomena occurring on the islands and to interact with them' – with competencies that are as relevant in the Azores as anywhere else in the world – such as 'to use knowledge and experience related to sport in civic activities that contribute to the promotion of solidarity and to the improvement of the quality of life.' Some stakeholders criticized this mixture, arguing that by presenting competencies in this manner, the regional government was treating the regional curriculum as an addition to the national curriculum, rather than viewing it as an organic adaptation.

In the text of Resolution number 124/2004, policy makers present competencies in a slightly more continuous manner. This document states that the competencies are organized 'according to a sequence of contexts of meaningfulness in learning, from the most general to the most specific.' Nevertheless, by sorting competencies into three different contexts – citizenship (competencies that are common to all the Portuguese citizens), insular reality, and Azorean reality – the official discourse remains quite subject to a categorical, additive logic, one that can hardly be made compatible with the blurry nature of some competencies.

Let us consider, for example, a competency to be developed in the context of citizenship, according to Resolution number 124/2004: 'to deploy cultural, scientific, and technological knowledge to understand reality and to deal with common situations and problems.' The same legislative document states that a competency to be developed in the context of insularity is 'to deploy scientific and technological knowledge to understand natural phenomena occurring on islands and to interact with them.' Are these two statements really about two different competencies or are they about one competency whose focus can be made broad or narrow? A more effective way of making the regional curriculum explicit can perhaps be tried by highlighting regional specifications of the national curriculum whenever those specifications are considered relevant. For example, if curriculum decision makers consider that 'to deploy cultural, scientific, and technological knowledge to understand reality and to deal with common situations and problems' is a competency that should be exerted in the Azores in particular ways, they may simply adapt the statement, by adding the following words: 'such as natural phenomena occurring on islands.' There is no need to create another competency.

A regional curriculum that begins 'with the continuous' is certainly a curriculum that fosters awareness of multiple identities. As W. H. Taylor puts it, 'individuals can and usually have many cultural identities, a Gaelic speaker being simultaneously a Highlander, a Scot, a Briton and a European: this list can expand in both directions' (quoted in Nóvoa, 2000, p. 44). Likewise, the identity of someone who lives in, say, Graciosa Island, in the Azores, is constructed at different geographical layers, nested within each other: Europe, Portugal, the Azores, Graciosa. The list can expand in both directions. In a non-categorical approach to curriculum differentiation, these multiple layers of identity are strongly considered and curricular work deliberately shifts from layer to layer all the time. This readiness to zoom in or out all the time can be enhanced if we think seriously of curriculum decision making through the lens of fractal geometry, as Davis and Sumara (2000, 2003) suggest, instead of keeping our thinking about the school and the curriculum framed by Euclidean geometry. Perhaps there is even some potential in the Azores for the construction of an interesting contribution to the exploration of forms of curricular work inspired by fractal geometry. People who live in an archipelago with nine islands that are quite different from one another – in terms of size, population,[5] political power, and other aspects – are especially sensible to an idea of island as a significant unit in terms of identity – a unit that is integrated into broader

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[5] S. Miguel, the biggest island, has about 132,000 inhabitants, whereas Corvo, the smallest one, has about 450.

units and includes sub-units, thus forming a network wherein identities and power relations are, like a *matryoshka*, multi-layered rather than based on a binary logic.

In short, the construction of a regional curriculum in the Azores (as well as in other small regions around the world) in a non-categorical way could be made in the light of the following guidelines:

1) Select content according to its broad social significance and its personal relevance to students; treat regional identity as one among many other sources of curricular relevance, not necessarily the main one;
2) Treat the regional curriculum as an organic adaptation of the national curriculum, not as an addition to it; translate that adaptation into the official documents by including regional specifications in the competencies stated at the national level, not by creating competencies at the regional level;
3) Maximize the exploration of connections between local and global phenomena.

Concluding comments

At the time when I write this article, it is too soon to evaluate with any certainty whether the regional curriculum of the Azores is closer to a categorical or to a non-categorical approach, although some evidence suggests that it has been mostly influenced by a categorical rationality. Noticeably, the official discourse that supports the regional curriculum under discussion is centered on 'the Azoreans' and implicitly suggests that 'the Azoreans' are the ones who, preferably, were born in the Azores and/or have lived most of their lives in that region. In other words, this discourse does not consider, for example, the immigrants that have recently arrived in the Azores – traditionally a region of emigrants, but now a region with some immigrants as well, most of them coming from Brazil and Eastern Europe.

In the age of globalization, local reality is heavily influenced by larger pictures (Smith, 2003). In this context, national and regional education policies are somehow put under pressure to adopt ways of conceptualizing the school and the curriculum that have been consolidated at a supranational level (Nóvoa, 2000; Smith, 2003). Given this pressure, regional policy makers may either conform or resist. To resist by isolating and emphasizing the specific features of a minority living in an almost invisible region can be quite frustrating and counterproductive. But perhaps there will be some chances of success if the relationship between identities that result mostly from the specific natural and cultural background of the region and other identities is explored, thus opening the space for strategic alliances with other minorities.

Making the world acknowledge the existence of the Azores is very difficult, perhaps impossible, but it is possible to improve the Azoreans' understanding of their place in the world, without which they cannot struggle for higher levels of respect for their identity. This requires solid knowledge about global phenomena and their relationship with local phenomena. In order to promote that kind of knowledge, the regional curriculum has to be international as well. Furthermore, it has to be continuously enacted by zooming in and out, between the global and the local.

Acknowledgment

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