

Curriculum Management and the Role of Curriculum Actors¹

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Introduction

Curriculum management⁴ can only be approached within the framework of the educational management of the institution as a whole. Its study demands a series of theoretical and methodological frameworks that recount the dynamics of the school organization, of the administrative aspects, of the didactic and pedagogical structures that support the educational proposal and the actions of the involved actors. This is why the analysis of curriculum management means identifying the interactions that are established between what belongs to the educational sphere (educational change policies and curriculum model) and the practices of participants in a living, dynamic reality in which the aspiration is to give sense and realization to curriculum. According to Castro (2005, p. 14), “the inclusion of curriculum management as a new construct allows to conceive the school duty in its essence, its objective”⁵, since it involves a more comprehensive and systemic approach to the curriculum processes and to educational change.

This article talks about curricular management from three conceptual frames of reference: educational change (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1999, Fullan, 2001; 2002), school and system improvement (Bolívar, 2007; Hopkins, Harris, Stroll & Mackay, 2011), and participation of different actors in curriculum design and management (Schwab, 1970; Bolívar, 2007; Díaz Barriga, 2010; Díaz Barriga & Barrón, 2014). The context in which we locate this work is that of curricular policies in Latin America and particularly in Mexico. We have reviewed the theoretical essays and empirical studies on the aspects mentioned in relation to the issue of curricular management, and based on a discussion of their content; we offer the reader this essay. We will tackle two issues: on one hand, the diverse ways to articulate educational and curriculum policies, curriculum management and the active participation of the different actors. On the other, the way in which different Mexican education institutions do incorporate the actors within the design and implementation processes of curriculum projects.

The method that we have followed in the elaboration of this article includes the revision of theoretical essays and research reports on the subject of curriculum management, some of them international, but with a greater emphasis on Hispanic and Latin American authors, as well as in Mexican bibliography. We also explored some web portals with official curricular documents that prescribe the curricular reforms and the basic contents of compulsory education. Finally, some research we have conducted is mentioned, particularly in the subject of actors of the curriculum. This work of specialized literature analysis aims to approach the understanding of the importance of curricular management processes in our context and seeks to uncover the challenges faced by educational institutions in this regard, especially the Mexican ones.



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Curriculum management and educational change possibilities

As the main premise of this essay, we affirm the following: the current concept of curriculum is tightly linked with the notion of school system management, since without the latter only the formal structures can be attended, and not its transition to the reality of the educational institution, and neither to the interests and necessities experienced by this institution. In this sense, we agree with one of the most outstanding Latin American theorists in the field of curriculum, who emphasizes the distance between the practice of curriculum in schools in contrast with the formal documents that prescribe the educational model:

One might think that the efforts that are made to rationalize the construction of a specific curriculum project trying to make prevail professionalized pedagogical criteria meets the administrative need to define projects on local basis and for each institution, in a system of negotiation and accountability towards the lobbies of the communities in which the different schools are inserted⁶ (Furlán, 1996, p. 70).

Talking about negotiation and accountability means that the different participants play an important role in the definition and implementation of the curriculum project. As a matter of fact, since almost four decades Schwab (1970) already set out that the participation of specific actors for the drawing up and decision making about curriculum is essential, such as teachers, experts in the different subjects or disciplines, students, experts in curriculum and those who are representative of the community. Nowadays it is common acknowledgement that the decision makers, and also the directors and people who care for the academic-administrative management at several levels also play a significant role for the successful outcome of a curriculum project. All of them are (or should be) participants in the design and development of the curriculum, so they are called "curriculum actors". The starting point are Schwab's principle known as *curriculum commonplaces* and the notion of *participatory curriculum* in his 1970 book, where he asserts that, if the participants of the educational institution are left behind or marginalized from a curriculum project, what will come out from it is a "blind spot" that will eventually undermine the project considering that it there will not be any appropriation of the curriculum, less still commitment to take it to the classroom reality and to generate transformation and innovation processes.

However, it is important to point out that the contemporary theoretical debates about curriculum and the systemic change that leads to its realization in a learning community have been developed in countries characterized by decentralized management that guarantee a certain autonomy for decision making. We can thus justifiably ask what happens in countries as Mexico, where the educational and curriculum models are drawn up by central agencies or are taken in by educational authorities and a committee of experts specially appointed to this duty.

In contrast to rigid and vertical educational models and curricula, which are created in a single central government agency (ministry or national state secretariat) in this article we assume that the educational institution plays a fundamental role for the development of curriculum. So, the educational communities understood as dynamic social organizations capable of learn and transform themselves constitute the basic units of educational change. This has provided a guideline for the approaches of efficient schools, for the improvement or restructuration of schools, in an attempt to understand that it is not enough to transform formal curriculum or to prescribe an innovating educational model, since the school itself must evolve towards a learning educational



organization, around a series of complex transformations where tensions and achievements emerge.

The school and system improvement research, conducted in countries such as England, Finland or the United States, has made it possible to understand the stages and factors involved in the success or failure of ambitious educational projects attempting reform whole systems and effective learning environments for all their students. In accordance with Hopkins, Harris, Stroll & Mackay (2011) what is needed is a ‘grand theory’ of system change in education that results in relatively predictable increases in student learning and achievement over time. Also, it is important to go beyond individual school improvement initiatives, to encourage and ensure with relative certainty that educational changes occur throughout the educational system wide changes, that is, at the level of districts, states and nations. These authors present a state of art with a broad empirical base of at least the last two and a half decades of school improvement studies. They affirm that in the early 1990’s the school improvement tradition was beginning to provide schools with guidelines and strategies for the management and implementation of change at the school level. The common aspiration of these initiatives was the ‘renewed’ or ‘self managing’ school and there was a greater focus upon organizational and classroom change reflected in approaches to staff development premised upon models of teaching.

In many countries, large amount of resources have been targeted at programmes and projects aimed at improving schools and raising standards of performance. The evidence to date, however, suggests that many of these external interventions, although very well intentioned, have had patchy and variable success [...] In particular, success seemed to elude schools in large urban areas serving the most disadvantaged (Harris, Stroll & Mackay, 2011, pp. 6-7).

Thus, since the beginning of this century, successive trends in research on school and system improvement research have shown that the key factors in educational change are as follows. Note the importance of the participation of the actors, the management of processes and programs, the interrelationship of the school with the educational system as a whole:

- A clear and comprehensive model of reform with an increasingly differentiated approach to school improvement.
- Transforming the organization of the school through managing change with emphasis on leadership in the quest for enhanced student achievement.
- District reform and network building (including professional learning communities) need to occur side by side, and they need to be linked. This is because school improvement is largely concerned with system level changes through collaboration and networking across schools and districts.
- Strong leadership at the regional level is need, linked to substantive training related to the goals of the programme and implementation support at the school level.

When we have to analyze or describe the way in which a school operates we generally use the term *management*: “the word management immediately evokes an ‘action’, has a dynamic dimension and besides demands a complementing model”⁷ (Antúnez, 2004, p. 167) Management can be understood as a) an action and effect of the school management; b) the set of actions that belong to the managerial function; and c) a task that is carried out under commission. According to Antúnez (2004, p. 169) “we



consider that management is the set of actions oriented towards the attainment of certain objectives that are developed in several areas of activity of the school organization and in the drawing up and assessment of which take part, to some extent, the people who are responsible to carry them out”⁸. The central place granted to the school and the importance accorded to management as a way to support the quality of teaching and the students’ learning and leaves behind the vision of teaching as an exclusive objective of classroom. This is due to the fact that “within the educational establishments the achievement of quality demands both curriculum renewal and new ways of carrying out the teaching duties”⁹ (Ezpeleta, 2004, p. 410).

The way to look towards educational change broadens if we assume that the school institutions, in their meaning of ever-changing learning communities, are a key factor for the curriculum policies that aim to improve the teaching-learning dynamics. Hence the vital importance of an in-depth understanding of the role that is played by the institution’s participants in the educational change processes.

The policies that have been established in order to improve education have followed different discursive logic and political practices, and this has produced a pedagogical logic centered on the improvement of the educational action within the classroom and beyond, and also political logic around public utility management (Bolívar, 2007). For this author, the school institution is the basic unit of curriculum development and improvement of educational standards by means of diverse “waves” that have been characterizing the curriculum reforms during the last decades. The first wave attempted to standardize the teaching practices by means of a technical bureaucratic model of control, standards and legal principles. The second wave searched for alternative ways to restructure the schools and the curriculum policies oriented towards a redesign of their organization and of the teachers’ professional practice, awarding increased autonomy for management and curriculum development. The third wave considered a curriculum development centered on the school able to transform the view of a merely administrative decentralization and to make possible the teachers’ understanding and commitment, the reflection about the contents they work with and about the teaching, learning and assessment processes, the collegial work they carry out and the constant communication with parents. In general terms, this issues are coincident with the international studies revised by Harris, Stroll & Mackay (2011), Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick, & West (2012).

In our view, this implies to enhance the curriculum actors’ role within the school institution itself and to adopt located educational approaches in order to deal with the curriculum realization level needed in a given context (Díaz Barriga, 2010; Díaz Barriga & Barrón, 2014). What we find underneath this last proposal is a no technocratic view of curriculum and the participants’ practices. This perspective refers to a practical or evolving approach of curriculum in which the teachers discuss and make decisions depending on their real conditions with a view to a possible change that meets the conditions of their institution and of their students’ specific needs and features. On this basis, the logic of a linear, little flexible, vertical and universalistic curriculum is at stake not only because of its inefficiency, but also because of the philosophical presuppositions and their ethical commitments. Unfortunately, this has traditionally been the logic of the construction of the Mexican curriculum in its different educational levels, mostly in basic compulsory education, which contradicts the great cultural diversity and social inequity existing in the different regions of the country, and within these, between their localities and schools (Pinar, 2011).

It is a fact that no curriculum model can be put into practice if we do not take into account significant aspects before implementing them. The establishment of an



educational and curriculum model is not only a rhetorical question, nor a purely technical matter, but it rather “is at the core of the school’s mission and socio-educational supply”¹⁰ (Bolívar, 2007, p. 49). In this sense, curriculum development goes hand in hand with institutional development; they are two sides of the same coin and articulate themselves in a systemic way with the administrative processes as far as management is concerned.

On the basis of the educational and curriculum model we can prefigure a school and organizational culture that produces a series of practices for the different actors (managers, administrators, experts, teachers and students) depending on their own experience, beliefs, interests and instituted knowledge.

School, as a cultural construct, adapts --more than adopts-- the reforms to its own ways of seeing and doing things, and in so far as every reform entails values and views that are more or less compatible with the organizational structures and cultures in which the individuals are working, it will need a process of reconstruction-adaptation¹¹ (Bolívar, 2007, p. 205).

In this regard, there is enough documentary evidence of how the elaboration of ambitious projects carried out by experts who operate beyond any kind of dialogue with the educational community can be considered as failed experience in curriculum reform processes. According to Ziegler (2003), the teachers (in Argentina and Latin America) usually are granted the role of “readers” of the curriculum base documents, which means that they are considered as recipients of what experts on contents or curriculum know. Those normative documents aim to serve as a tool to normalize educational practices, but they actually do not have a significant impact, at least not as they are expected to, neither on the mentality, neither on the educational practices that take place in the day to day school work. And when they impact, they just allow some degree of interpretation and appropriation of the reforms, but this appropriation usually remains at discursive level and uses to cause significant tensions about professional legitimization. As far as it has been studied about the educational change processes, there is clear evidence that the intention to shape or prescribe the processes of reconstructing teaching and transforming the school institution by means of those normative documents made up by experts who do not belong to the diversity and complexity of the educational institutions, since they do not express the participants’ knowledge, situation and experiences or even feelings, is doomed to have a very limited impact. The question is therefore to think up the different levels of authorship and application that curriculum involves and not to forget the lessons learned with regarding the different actors of the curriculum process.

On this issue, Andy Hargreaves (interviewed by Romero, 2007) considers that the problem must be revisited from a much wider perspective about educational change. For this author, the problem has to do with a poor joint action of schools, teachers and educational systems, since those should be reorganized in a rationale of inclusive communities able to transform their structure and culture in order to deal with the elements that concern them and thus be able to respond to the expectations about education of an ever-changing, unforeseeable and uncertain society, whose main feature is its diversity and not its uniformity.

Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick & West (2012), also speak for inclusive schools, as well as for the return of the school system to their historical purpose: ensuring a sound education for every child. After analyzing empirical evidence from a series of studies carried out over 20 years concerning schools that are effective for all children and young people, they argue that it is necessary to complement within-school



developments with efforts that link schools with one another and with their wider communities. They also conclude that national policies for tackling wider inequities in schools and in society are needed.

On the other hand, it is very important to understand that in the development of a curriculum project several realization levels come into play and that the diverse social subjects who sustain curriculum and play a role within it use to do it in a differentiate way, depending on the educational project to which they subscribe.

The idea of a project presupposes the existence of a subject able to define a future as an option that is objectively possible and not as a merely arbitrary projection. And drawing up those projects is how the subject relates to reality in a relationship that is supported by its ability to transform this reality into the content of a social will, which in turn will be able to determine the direction of the social processes. In this way, potential facts can be predetermined thanks to the action of a specific social will. In this context, the appropriation of present becomes a way to build the future and, conversely, a project of future, led by a subject, turns into a way to appropriate the present time. As a matter of fact, the subject only will be really active if he or she is able to make a distinction between what is viable and what just belongs to the sphere of desire, this means if his or her activity is part of a conception of future as horizon of possible actions¹² (Zemelman, in De Alba, 1998, p. 76).

The decision to implement a curriculum project concerns the whole community and its management is not only up to the managerial staff, but also includes the teachers' practice and the intervention of the academic-administrative staff, and its appropriation by the students themselves as well. For what concerns the recent experience of the Mexican curriculum reforms for basic and secondary education, several studies about the teachers' perceptions show that those consider that they have not been taken into account for the process of drawing up the curriculum project, that they do not receive the necessary means to implement the ambitious changes that are conferred on them, not only with regard to curriculum contents but also to the innovating pedagogical models, including the necessary digital skills. Thus, many teachers report the urgency with which the curriculum reforms are carried out, the total lack of awareness about classroom reality, the scarce participation of teachers in the decision-making processes, the lack of school supplies and of infrastructure able to meet the new demands, the stiffness or inclusive obsolescence of the authorities responsible for school management, but above all the lack of an adequate awareness of what the transformations mean for the educational community as a whole (Díaz Barriga, 2010; 2012; Díaz Barriga & Barrón, 2014).

When curriculum changes are carried out, the processes become extremely complex, because it is not enough to design a technically well thought-out study plan made up by experts and based on theoretical and methodological grounds that are consistent with the framework of the current society. The former is important, but not enough. The transition towards this curriculum model also has to be taken into account, over and above the legal and administrative arrangements that are needed for its implementation. It is also necessary to encourage the emergence of a totally new institutional culture as regards to the role of teachers and students, the change to new practices of knowledge and knowhow, and to understand that this change affects all the aspects in which the actors of the educational community have been involved at several levels. It is also important to keep in mind that every transition period that leads to a



significant change entails a cognitive and emotional cost for its participants (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1999; Gimeno, 2000). This is why the UNESCO itself (2005, in Díaz Barriga, 2010) defines innovation as a process of “creative destruction in conditions of uncertainty”¹³.

A new curriculum proposal, and in particular if oriented to innovation and to the transformation of traditional and institutionalized practices, demands a different training for teachers that makes them able not only to understand and manage curriculum, but also to recreate it and to build it. The teachers’ professionalization component aside, from the point of view of the social sense of teaching the teacher is a key stakeholder for the promotion of understanding and coping with the current culture and the social issue for the new generations. Therefore, its practice should not be conceived exclusively as a major in Education or a functional practice within the educational environment, but it should be approached in a wide sociopolitical sense in order to influence the development of strategies able to take care and preserve the human life and the cultural and ideological diversity and thereby build a more fair and humanized society.

In a similar way, it should be necessary to consider the students as active participants of the curriculum projects and their management, and not only as a target group. This is the claim of who defend the idea that students can be “active subjects who understand the educational environment they live in, who search a sense for their duty, who appreciate and re-evaluate their own schooling, live intensely their school career, write and rewrite their own story and build day after day their identity as students, teenagers and young adult”¹⁴ (Guzmán & Saucedo, 2000, p.12). It is relevant to point out that the expectations that have been conceived around the curriculum models since the nineties have been prone to defend a student-centered curriculum approach (Blumberg, 2008; Weimer, 2013). In the case of the university curriculum, it means that the student training has to be focused on practice in real environments, the solution to complex problems, the analysis of significant cases for the profession, the participation in situated projects, and collaborative and interdisciplinary work amongst other approaches, all of them very demanding for the future professional in training.

This means that students also experience the tensions that exist between the traditional educational experiences, which position them as recipients of contents, and the growing demand of active agents, complex knowledge builders, decision-makers regarding their own curriculum careers, that need to be personalized in order to meet their needs and interests. Moreover, since the beginning of this century the transformation of the learning environments was already tangible (called by Coll, 2013, a new learning ecology) towards a new one where students take part to the selection and to the drawing up itself of the activities, projects and ideal learning approaches, above all at university.

Finally, it would be important to point out that the role played by the directors of educational institutions goes far beyond their administrative authority, since they also have to be academic leaders and experts in curriculum management, to develop pertinent strategies in order to boost its development and implementation based on a scheme that involves the whole community (Hopkins, 2007). On the other hand, there should be sensitivity to the recognition and acceptance of difference and dissension within those processes, since a good disposition is essential to have an impact not only in academic aspects, but also, and not less, on the organizational, financial, occupational aspects and those that have to do with infrastructure. All those aspects play a major role for the management of curriculum innovations.



Because of all those elements we have been referring to Plazola & Rautenberg (2009) state that one of the big mistakes of Mexico's educational administrations has been to draw up centralized and vertical curricula. Erroneously the trend has been to take as conceptual starting point that changing curriculum is a task of "technical assembly" of a study program, or of what we use to call currently the *curriculum map*. In contrast, taking into account its nature of social project materialized in a specific context, curriculum change should be regarded and analyzed from the perspective of institutional micropolitics. According to the above-mentioned authors, the change within the curriculum structures uses to represent an action belonging to the "disturbing intervention" type for the actors of the educational communities, since it puts in motion collective imaginations, spaces of power, forms of participation and, therefore, often unsettles its position within the institution or undermines its normal practices.

One more thing to take into consideration is that it is not possible to talk about the curriculum actors from a unifying perspective, as if all of them would assume the same stance about the process of change. For instance, when we analyzed the curriculum reform that was implemented in a university that is responsible for the training of education professionals, we were able to identify at least four stances: the teachers who were part of the "experts" and constituted the proactive team supporting change; the collective who did not sign up for the work on curriculum but did not resist it either; the group of teachers who opposed the curriculum project and organized themselves to block it; and finally the collective who showed a certain degree of disposition to the curriculum reform but only accepted it to the extent that it needed their own project and interests (Plazola & Rautenberg, 2009).

This allows us to conclude that the curriculum project will be able to progress or will be hindered depending on a series of events that are laid down by power relationships, the own features of the changing project, the definition of the specific tasks (assigned, assumed or postponed) that are devolved upon the actors.

The current literature about educational change and curriculum reforms uses to report the resistance or opposition movements experienced by the participants towards the planned transformations, above all when those come from top to bottom and outside in, since they threaten their position within the institution or discredit their usual practices without offering conditions for the expected change, or when the environment to change becomes "menacing" from the actors' perspective. In many cases and recently, in our academic environment several participants in education have declared themselves opposed to the different reforms and innovations, and the fact is that resistance uses to come from menaces (clear or perceived) that are in conflict with matters such as public education, laicism in education, teachers' employment or labor-union stability, or when the new curriculum map cancels spaces for education and training, for instance when they intend to reduce the education of young students in arts and humanities, as a kind of repudiation of the neoliberal policies imposed by the international agencies for the educational system.

Curriculum and institutional practices

Curriculum is not an object, but a process where a peculiar and complex relationship between decisions and determinations occurs (Beltrán-Llavador, 2010). In order to point out the relevance of the curriculum management processes it is necessary to know for sure that curriculum is not only that "object" that has been before referred to as "study plan", and currently in its extended version as "curriculum map". Prominent academics of the field have set out that in order to understand properly what curriculum implies as a project and as practice as well, it is important to situate the



historic and social context and moment in which it has been established, its multidetermined nature and the different planes that lead to its eventual realization. But it is necessary primarily to identify how curriculum incarnates in its actors and how it is developed and managed in a given institution.

Authors such as Follari (1982) understand curriculum as the set of academic-oriented practices that are carried out within the higher education institutions, including the planning process of those practices, taking into account the fact that it is crossed by two planes, the formal-structural plane and the evolving-practical one. The first one refers to the legitimization of a kind of knowledge and of a culture by means of the determination of disciplinary contents, linked to an educational project within an institution and its connection with the social environment and practice of the profession. The second level, called evolving-practical, analyzes the operation of the project, where actors, teachers, students and management staff direct the curriculum development and administration.

Taking into account both levels, Gimeno (1989, p. 19) considers that it is essential to “figure out challenge not only from a political and social perspective, but also from the point of view of its technical implementation”¹⁵. According to Ruiz-Larraguível (1985), the selection of contents and their distribution do not derive exclusively from the universe of knowledge of a scientific discipline, but it originates in the idea the curriculum makers have about society, profession and the kind of graduate that the institution wants to train. Likewise, we agree with De Alba (1998, p. 75), who asserts that curriculum is above all the synthesis of cultural elements (knowledge, values, beliefs, habits) that make up together a political educational proposal, planned and driven by diverse social groups and sectors with different and contradictory interests, although some of them tend to be predominant or hegemonic, whereas other groups or sectors are prone to oppose and resist this domination or hegemony. This is why when a curriculum proposal is achieved it always will be the result of mechanisms of negotiation or, to the contrary, of social imposition for the different participants that are involved in this process.

It is undeniable that each educational institution makes up curriculum in correlation to its interests and the cultural values that it wants to promote. This led Apple (1979) to propose that the different kinds of codes and symbols selected by the educational institutions dialectally network to the different kinds of normative and cultural awareness of an unequal society. At the same time, Furlán (1995) considers that it is necessary to take into account the participation, agreement and decision making processes linked with curriculum management, considering it as the sum of the pedagogical management (related to the training agenda) and the curriculum management (that has to do with the teaching project of the cultural segment that has been chosen in order to implement it).

For all those reasons, we believe that it is necessary to conceive curriculum as something more than an isolated educational project. It is important to acknowledge that curriculum is also part of a political, social, economic and cultural framework. There is no place for the alleged neutrality of stances or groups. It is undeniable that within the curriculum process a space for struggle is produced between the diverse groups and sectors interested in fostering a specific educational project, which leads to a continuous dynamic of denial and/or resistance by the involved subjects.

Curriculum policy and actors

Nowadays, facing the bunch of neoliberal policies that aim to determine the what and how of curriculum, several social subjects, whose historic consciousness



allows them to orient diverse actions towards a wider project, have generated a series of alternative points of view against the hegemony of the globalizing policies, and therefore the tensions and dissent have increased about curriculum.

Along the same lines, during the last years a new trend has been strengthening in Latin America that considers curriculum development within the framework of policies tending to –at least theoretically– the administrative decentralization as an answer to the curriculum model “from top to bottom” and “outside in” that has been prevailing, heavily concentrated in the national secretaries and departments of education.

This decentralization aims to search for new ways to draw up, operate and assess curriculum, seemingly centered on the different educational modalities, regions and communities, in order to meet the huge diversity (and iniquity) that typifies them. Such a process, if correctly implemented, would bring about new ways of participation and control that include the selection of contents, the regulation of teaching practices, and also a different academic-administrative organization. With this in mind, it is important not only to pursue high graduation rates, but also to achieve that curriculum is situated, equity-oriented and recognizes diversity as a key value.

In Mexico, as in other countries, the construction and implementation of a curriculum project, the regulation processes of curriculum tend to lead to an expression of this administration in convergent ways oriented to shape the school practice in a certain direction. This involves important “top-down” prescriptive aspects that are at the same time academic (selection, structuring and organization of contents, methodological, didactical and evaluative orientations); administrative (for instance, registration systems, grade descriptions, school registers) and related to infrastructure (for instance, the technologies that can be used to support the teaching and learning processes, educational furniture and environment, instructional materials). Often the central administration is unable to manage the diversity of educational contexts, social and educational inequality in the country, so that its policies of curricular implementation are unsuccessful. By ignoring the cultural capital of the actors and the real training needs for educational change, is not provided to the educational agents with the necessary means to undertake the project, including the qualification of the students themselves to fully apprehend the challenge that a new curriculum involves (Díaz Barriga & Barrón, 2014).

According to Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman (2008), for the thorough understanding of curriculum it is necessary to take into account various discourses; and one of the ways to read it is as a political document. Those authors point out that the analysis of curriculum as a political document started during the seventies, in the light of the Marxist and neo-Marxist theories and under the influence of the British Sociology of Education guidelines. In Mexico, the study of curriculum policies has been a component of what has been called *educational policies or reforms*, and the study of this field can be associated to the critical and postmodern school of thought since it contains a critical analysis of curriculum. According to Michael Apple, one of the functions carried out by the critical analysis of curriculum is the following one:

[...] to enlighten the ways in which policies and practices are interwoven with the relationships of exploitation and domination --and with the struggles against those relationships— within society (Apple, 2011, p. 7).

The understanding of the curriculum policies and their realization within the educational institutions should be critically analyzed not only by experts of curriculum, but also by the different actors who take part in the drawing, development, management



and assessment of a study plan, given that those policies actually will influence themselves. We already mentioned above that since the seventies Schwab (1970) set out the need to reach a balanced participation of given persons to the prior deliberation and to decision-making about curriculum. However, in Mexico the real participation of those actors, and especially of the teachers and students, is subject to interests more related to group interests and politics in accordance with institutional cultures, that eventually promote --or decide not to do so-- the participation in decision-making.

The curriculum policies are responsible for establishment and regulation of the rules and the political and academic decision-making bodies condition the contents and practices of curriculum development (Gimeno, 1989). Therefore, the educational policies determine the degree of power and autonomy of the different agents or actors and any curriculum construction becomes, at least to a certain extent, a political matter.

On the other hand, the curriculum policies are objectified through the drawing of curriculum and its normativity. Any curriculum proposes a selected prescription of the teaching contents, although this process cannot be reduced to the written document. This prescription of *what* and *how* is not preserved stably during the curriculum processes, but it incessantly changes according to the political, institutional and classroom administration.

Curriculum policy has been granted the main responsibility to decide about what students have to learn in the educational institutions and the means and conditions to achieve it as well. This includes the impact that those decisions can have on the teachers', the students' and the management staff's practices. In Mexico, the Secretary of Public Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública, SEP), equivalent to a ministry of education, is responsible for compulsory basic education, regulates private and public education, and defines the curriculum policy of the national educational system, and specifies the educational degree that should be attained. By means of what is established about compulsory schooling, the SEP reveals how it conceives the role of education, culture and values that it wants to communicate. In general terms, SEP prescribes the type of instruction or socialization processes for the students in the Mexican schools. However, there are also institutions, especially public universities, which have autonomy status, including the freedom to propose their curricular projects. Even so, in all cases, there is a strong influence of international organizations and agencies (UNESCO, OECD, World Bank, PISA, among other) in the definition of curriculum models, which obey current globalization and neoliberal tendencies. It is impossible to avoid thinking that new forms of intellectual colonialism exist through curricular policies and international assessments, modeled on economic, labor and social interests.

According to Terigi (1999) the transformations that are generally produced within curriculum in Latin America tend to cause tensions and conflicts, both if it is considered as a normative text that regulates the institution's training activity and if its sense is expanded to the whole of institutional practices that are build day to day within the schools (in the teaching and learning processes, in the ways to organize teachers and students, in the distributions of times and spaces, etc.). How this change is valued can be interpreted in the light of the relations that actors construct between prescriptions and concrete curriculum practices. This author points out five features that are common for the Latin American curriculum policies and that could explain the rise of tensions and contradictions:

- In a context of educational decentralization, curriculum appears as a recentralization device for education.
- The trend is to legitimize the centralized curriculum devices based on the principle of academic knowledge.



- Curriculum experiences a process of homogenization of the presentation form.
- There is a correlation between centralized curricula and centralized assessment.
- Change is promoted with the school institution as starting point.

The dynamics of curriculum reforms that have been carried out during the last decades in Mexico and Latin America show that curriculum policy can be promoted and assumed as a mere official prescription embodied in formal documents, as a control device for the processes and actors, or as the possibility of encouraging processes of curriculum negotiation and appropriation situated within an educational community. We coincide in this way to look at the Latin-American reality with several authors that we have read for this article: only from the latter perspective and taking into account different levels of curriculum implementation will allow the participation of the different actors in favor of the educational change.

Facing this maelstrom of economic, politic and social changes that have been implemented during the last decades, new questions and challenges to the school curriculum arise according to the different contexts that are studied. Just like during the two decades the trend has been to draw up competence-centered curriculum, favoring the competences known as generic or key competences, nowadays the question deals with the curriculum content. This is why an emerging trend in several countries is the definition of national curricula for basic education, configured around a bunch of contents that are considered as basic.

But the question is what are basic contents? And the answer is not simple.

The exploratory review we carried out of several documents about educational policies in educational portals of Latin-American countries¹⁶ allowed us to find out that in diverse curriculum projects at national level, the basic contents are part of the universe of curriculum contents and imply a selection of what can be understood as priority or essential in student education. We revised the curriculum models of Mexico, Chile, Argentina, Colombia, República Dominicana, Uruguay y España. What they understand as “priority or essential”, operates in different directions. Although many of the curriculum models refers to competencies and performance standards, the key contents are usually lists of knowledge specific to scientific disciplines, and to a lesser extent procedures, skills or attitudes. Why they are the most important contents can be understood in different ways. In some models, this basic consideration is accompanied by criteria such as the feasibility of its assessment or the guarantee that they lead to quality education or even social equity. For other, “basic” refers to a humanizing education, or education with a sense of social responsibility. We also observed references to the contents that belong to the subjects with a higher place in curriculum hierarch (language, mathematics), or to contents related to the promotion of certain skills or knowledge that help students to manage in the current world, globalized and technologized. In other cases, the basic content is linked to the problems that worry the learner and the citizens on matters such as health, security, ecology, living together, et cetera. To a lesser extent, contents that allow a multi or interdisciplinary treatment between curricular areas.

Such kind of politic orientation to “basic contents” has given rise for reviving discussions about the nature of knowledge and the logic-disciplinary structure of curriculum versus the cognitive or psychological structure of the learners, adding to the discussion of what is basic the question of social and cultural relevance and transcendence of knowledge. Nevertheless, the main concern is that this “back to the basic” politics eventually lead to a reductionist and impoverished curriculum that gives



priority to factual contents, the decontextualized “cutbacks” of the scientific disciplines, that can be easily assessed in massively applied objective proofs.

We agree that teachers are a key component to achieve “to overcome the gap between curriculum as an intention and the mechanisms to make it operational”¹⁷ (Stenhouse, 2013, p. 13), since if the participation of teachers is not taken into account, the risk is that the management staff itself forsakes making of curriculum a lever for changing education. We mentioned above that when the teacher’s participation is reduced to the role of a formal curriculum operator or executor, this happens at the expense of the consideration of teacher as a thinker, and then his/her commitment to curriculum is at stake. Prominent authors have stated that in the process of construction of a pedagogical order, the teacher exercises a professional sense, makes decisions, thinks and acts according to certain requirements of rationality and guided by a practical reason, in this case a pedagogical one. Likewise, all teaching practice implies a moral commitment consisting on the training of the future generations, considering the nature of decisions and opinions that teachers carry out about other human beings, the learners, in situations of unavoidable uncertainty with severe conflicts of values and visions (A. Díaz Barriga, 2005, 2008; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1999; Tardif & Gauthier, 2005).

In this regard, Valdez (2013) takes as starting point the recognition that the transformations that are needed nowadays in the educational institutions must be radical, but are, at the same time, very complex and hard to take over of the educational community.

This innovating effort in the educational field generates a very positive oxygenation, since as a general rule the new reforms bring with them ideas of improvement and inspiring plans that promise to resolve educational and, consequently, social and cultural issues, but they also bring along a chaotic atmosphere, since the changes imposed from an exogenous dimension represent challenges for the teacher (Valdez, 2013, pp. 2-3).

The main issue about teachers is that during decades they have been taking part into practices that differ a lot from what the new curriculum models and proposals expect, especially when the transformations are prescribed or imposed by the educational authorities and do not come from the needs experienced by the teacher of his/her educational community. For this author, it is unlikely that the teacher changes what M. Fullan calls “his/her significant structures”, above all because the change is presented to the community by means of a discourse that conveys a series of technical and academy-oriented conceptions associated with the neoliberal discourse and because those conceptions usually do not recognize, or even deny, the meanings that teachers have been constructing throughout his/her career and that are part of his/her meaning depositories. On the other hand, the reforms use to overlook that those teachers tend to react in very different ways according to their knowledge and acceptance of the educational models that authorities want to implement in their educational institution. The knowledge they have about it varies from familiarity and clarity to opacity and little transparency; this means that the farther they consider the cultural object that authorities pretend to impose to them as coordinate for their teaching practice, the more negative the opinions will be and consequently the stronger the resistance to it (Valdez, 2013).

As regards the managerial staff and the experts that they use to hire or assign to the process of drawing up the educational and curriculum model they will implement, in our context we find only a few studies about curriculum management, in contrast with the wide literature about teachers. Nevertheless, experts usually report that their role as representative of the opinion of the authorities (management staff) or academy (experts)



does not reveal any kind of closeness to the community and that on the contrary the process takes place in a vertical and imperative way, especially in highly centralized and hierarchical educational systems. Consequently, for authors as Hopkins (2007), Clark (2000) and Fullan (2001; 2002), a new perspective on leadership is needed, because the deep transformation in an institution demands appropriated management processes (persons and groups with legitimacy and convening power) able to create conditions that encourage the community to take part in the transformation process and to make theirs the innovating culture that is implemented within the institution and, of course, able to construct optimal conditions to operate and diversify the needed funding. For those sociologists who analyze educational change, change only happen when there are agents who put forward organization and innovation initiatives that, by means of specific actions based on a negotiated participation, prompt the community to experience important dynamic transformations both in its structures and in its training processes.

With regard to the students' role within the change processes, the educational discourse uses to claim that all the recent models are oriented to focus curriculum on their learning and on their training as citizens of the knowledge society, and that the aim is their welfare, development or empowerment. However, the first thing we have to question is the background knowledge about the trainees for whom the educational policies and models are implemented, since frequently authorities and experts draw up models based on conventional socio-demographic statistics but without a full research on their identity, on the ways in which they appropriate knowledge, the kind of youth culture they belong to, their expectations and interests towards a specific profession, amongst other matters. The students use to be objects and not active subjects in the design processes of educational reforms. According to Moreno (2010, p. 87), facing the educational change process, "students first play the role of observers, and only after become the guinea pig of the new curriculum that will be prescribed to them"¹⁸.

If we think that university curriculum targets young adults, why should we not re-think their role in constructing it, in making decisions as regards contents, experiences or teaching methods?

Recently, we conducted a study about the way in which undergraduate university students experience the process of implementing a curricular reform and new educational models (Díaz Barriga, Soto & Díaz, 2015), which in terms of theory shares many of the innovations that have been mentioned in the previous paragraphs (flexibility to construct a personalized curriculum career, training to practice in real environments, inclusion of digital technologies in teaching, tutorship as accompaniment to the student in his/her training career, educational innovation, amongst others). We found that such young people, although they are not experts on curriculum and do not have an evidence a thorough knowledge of the curriculum map of the degree they are studying, can recount the *ethos* of the institution and what is most significant about the curriculum management processes. If students are valued and given a voice, who could better than them identify those aspects related to null curriculum and hidden curriculum within the institution and to the failures in the administrative implementation and the alleged didactic innovation around the real conditions of the teaching they receive.

The most relevant contribution to this study was to find out, by means of the analysis of the students' personal stories in their role as curriculum actors, that as for other learners enrolled in lower educational levels, curriculum reality is shaped according to the teaching mediation processes within the classroom. In fact, the teachers' attitudes and pedagogic approach, the sense and signification they accord to curriculum contents and the way in which they induct students to the "occupational



risks” of the profession they are training for can encourage (or not) the willingness to learn and the acceptance of the curriculum they are studying. Amongst the most recurring issues raised by students we find the criticism to *ex cathedra* lecture as the only teaching method in many curriculum spaces, the lack of an effective training to competences for exercising the profession, the scarcity of technologies more appropriate for the digital era or of suitable orientation and tutorship processes, the absence of real learning environments or of well-equipped laboratories. Some of the students were able to identify the ideological disputes and the power struggles between the different groups about curriculum, or show a critical attitude toward the excessive bureaucratization of the school management authorities or toward some teachers’ authoritarianism, and thus question the statement that “curriculum is student-centered”¹⁹ (Díaz Barriga, Soto & Díaz, 2015). The underlying question, expressed in the students’ discourse itself, is finally to what extent the innovating learner-centered approaches, that involve flexible curriculum management mechanisms and also a strong personalization of the learning paths, since those should be modulated according to their needs, characteristics and preferential cultural practices.

Final thoughts

We should like to reaffirm here that the curriculum implementation is not a merely technical issue, nor can it be reduced to the development of a curriculum project or a curriculum map, no matter how innovating it can be. The realization of curriculum goes hand in hand with multiple actions at several levels within the school institutions, both for what regards management and administration and concerning the educational, cultural and political processes and practices experienced by the different actors who take part in the educational action.

In this article, we have emphasized the complexity of changing the mentalities and practices that have been significant for the actors of the school institution when trying to set up a new educational model. Change is desirable and possible when it is oriented to the improvement of the educational processes and to the solution of issues that are significant for the school community and the society as a whole, but it faces many obstacles when the educational policy turns into models that can be very innovating from the perspective of the expert who designs it, but that are established compulsorily by policies that turn out to be coercive for the actors.

The literature we reviewed led us to the idea that if we do not take into account the levels of knowledge and participation and the subjective sense that the different actors grant to the educational model and the curriculum project that comes with as well, it will be difficult to favor the appropriation of this curriculum proposal and its approval by the community. And even more if the actors are not really involved in the design and implementation of the educational model in the institution to which they belong, or if they consider it as something alien and distant that has nothing to do with their own necessities and commitments.

But if, on the contrary, we recognize that curriculum management based on negotiation and on the participation of the different actors in decision-making can motivate a collaborative work, doubt remains about what is the real impact of those processes on the school culture and on the daily work within the classroom, particularly in contexts such as our Latin-American institutions, and it is in this specific aspect where we have to look for different options in order to reach the individual appropriation of a common institutional project.

Thus, it is not enough simply to modify regulations or to restructure the management of the educational institution, but it is necessary to develop a



comprehensive project that brings together the different interests of the academic community and to prioritize a new school culture and puts the emphasis on the shared values, working methods and expectations about day-to-day work.

Far beyond the curriculum contents and the basis of educational model that prescribes a specific educational philosophy and a training proposal, in every school and university there is an *ethos* that can be read between the lines as an invisible pedagogy, and this pedagogy, according to Vallaeys (2015, p. 1), “is related to the execution of routines within the institutions, intersubjective routines that legitimize, in a subtle and sometimes not so subtle way, prejudices, values that can hardly be upheld, sneaky discriminations”²⁰. In this light, none of the school or university communal life styles can be considered totally neutral, that’s why it is so important to disclose the values that are effectively promoted by the institutions, the behaviors and attitudes that are encouraged for daily life and its possible contradictions, beyond the dynamics of strains that are caused when educational change is fostered within the institution. We therefore consider that the institutional *ethos* reflects to a great extent the way in which curriculum is managed and the status that is granted to its actors.

In our opinion, the greatest challenge for the authorities that head transformation projects in education, is to be able to meet the external demands without neglecting the own needs and to motivate the generation of alternatives of their own. Unfortunately, the educational authorities in our country, often operate according interests focused on the struggle for political power and institutional control, safeguarding more than anything else the interests of the group that brought them to power.

Finally, we agree with the authors who set out that the school institution itself must be seen as the basic unit of the educational action oriented to its improvement and promote its transformation as a professional learning community, so that the educational policies and the ways in which they are managed can lead to a greater autonomy, to more power of decision and to an actual adjustment to the specific situation of part of the actors who make up the community. But we do not conceive of the school as a basic unit in isolation, since this undermines its possibilities of change.

In particular, we have highlighted the contributions of the school improvement tradition, which is a programme for innovation focusing on change and problem-solving in educational practice. Avoiding simplistic and mechanistic solutions, schools have to design and invent their own solutions for specific problems and improvement in general. However, care must be taken that this is not interpreted as leaving the schools adrift, at their own risk, without receiving the support, resources or inputs required to bring about the changes. Among the policies announced on the new Mexican educational model of 2016, it is said that the central authorities will give a margin of autonomy to the schools in the content and practice of the curriculum, as well as the possibility of generating their own school improvement project. Although it is stated that basic material conditions will be ensured in all public schools, but minimum procedures for this are not established. On the other hand, significant cuts have been announced to the educational and social budget in the country, one more factor that undermines improvement projects.

Notes

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⁴ In Spanish, management is translated as “gestión” and in this paper, concerns to the ability to organize and implement the curriculum and teaching projects in schools and universities. The biggest challenge facing educational institutions is to become self-managing institutions, especially in contexts such as Mexico, where reigns the centralized national curriculum.

⁵ In Spanish in the original version: “la inclusión de la gestión curricular como un nuevo constructo permite situar el quehacer de la escuela en su esencia, en su objetivo”.

⁶ In Spanish in the original version: “Se puede pensar que el esfuerzo por racionalizar la construcción del proyecto curricular bajo la preponderancia de criterios pedagógicos profesionalizados responde a la necesidad administrativa de definir proyectos a nivel local y a nivel de cada establecimiento, en un sistema de negociación y rendición de cuentas frente a los grupos de presión de las comunidades en que se encuentran las escuelas”.

⁷ In Spanish in the original version: “la palabra gestión sugiere de inmediato una “acción”, tiene una dimensión dinámica y además necesita un referente que la complemente”.

⁸ In Spanish in the original version: “entendemos la gestión como el conjunto de acciones orientadas hacia la consecución de ciertos objetivos que se desarrollan en las diversas áreas de actividad de la organización y en cuyo diseño y evaluación participan, en alguna medida, las personas encargadas de llevarlas a cabo”.

⁹ In Spanish in the original version: “en los planteles, la consecución de la calidad necesita tanto la renovación curricular como de nuevas formas del trabajo docente”.

¹⁰ In Spanish in the original versión: “constituye el núcleo de la misión y de la oferta socioeducativa de la escuela”.

¹¹ In Spanish in the original version: “La escuela, como construcción cultural, adapta - más que adopta- las reformas a sus propios modos de ver y hacer, en la medida en que toda reforma conlleva unos valores y visiones, que son más o menos compatibles con las estructuras organizativas y culturas en que trabajan las personas, precisará una reconstrucción-adaptación”.

¹² In the Spanish original version: “La idea de proyecto supone la existencia de un sujeto capaz de definir un futuro como opción objetivamente posible, y no como mera proyección arbitraria. Es gracias a los proyectos que el sujeto establece una relación con la realidad que se apoya en su capacidad de transformar a esa realidad en contenido de una voluntad social, la cual, a su vez, podrá determinar la dirección de los procesos sociales. Así, hechos potenciales podrán ser predeterminados, gracias a la acción de una voluntad social particular. En este contexto, la apropiación del presente deviene un modo de construir el futuro, y, a la inversa, un proyecto de futuro, protagonizado por un



sujeto, se transforma en un modo de apropiación del presente...En realidad, el sujeto será realmente activo, sólo si es capaz de distinguir lo viable de los puramente deseable, es decir, si su acción se inscribe en una concepción del futuro como horizonte de acciones posibles”.

¹³ In the Spanish original version: “destrucción creadora en condiciones de incertidumbre”.

¹⁴ In the Spanish original version: “sujetos activos, que interpretan su entorno educativo, que buscan un sentido a su quehacer, que valoran y revaloran su escolarización, viven intensamente su trayectoria escolar, escriben y re–escriben su propia historia y construyen día a día su identidad como estudiantes, adolescentes y como jóvenes”.

¹⁵ In the Spanish original version: “la tarea a cumplir tanto desde un nivel de análisis político-social como desde el punto de vista de su instrumentación técnica”.

¹⁶ En el mes de agosto de 2016 revisamos los siguientes sitios web para identificar qué se está concibiendo como contenidos básicos del currículo; en su mayoría, se habla de competencias y estándares de desempeño, los contenidos curriculares son conocimientos que se ordenan en asignaturas.

-Contenidos básicos comunes para la educación general básica en Argentina.

<http://www.bnm.me.gov.ar/giga1/documentos/EL001215.pdf>

-Elementos curriculares, España. [http://www.mecd.gob.es/educacion-](http://www.mecd.gob.es/educacion-mecd/mc/lomce/el-curriculo/curriculo-primaria-eso-bachillerato/elementos.html)

[mecd/mc/lomce/el-curriculo/curriculo-primaria-eso-bachillerato/elementos.html](http://www.mecd.gob.es/educacion-mecd/mc/lomce/el-curriculo/curriculo-primaria-eso-bachillerato/elementos.html)

-Marco legal del diseño curricular en Colombia

[http://www.huila.gov.co/documentos/educacion/huilaensena/Acompa%C3%B1amiento-Curricular/Taller%202/MARCO LEGAL DEL CURRÍCULO EN COLOMBIA.pdf](http://www.huila.gov.co/documentos/educacion/huilaensena/Acompa%C3%B1amiento-Curricular/Taller%202/MARCO%20LEGAL%20DEL%20CURRICULO%20EN%20COLOMBIA.pdf)

-Contenidos básicos del currículo de República Dominicana.

<http://www.educando.edu.do/centro-de-recursos/curriculo-dominicano/los-contenidos-basicos/>

-Currículum nacional, Chile. <http://www.curriculumnacional.cl/#>

-Documento base de análisis curricular, Uruguay.

[http://www.ceip.edu.uy/documentos/2015/atd/Documento Base de An%C3%A1lisis ATD por Escuela.pdf](http://www.ceip.edu.uy/documentos/2015/atd/Documento%20Base%20de%20An%C3%A1lisis%20ATD%20por%20Escuela.pdf)

-Nueva Escuela Secundaria de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires. Ciclo Básico 2014-2020.

http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/areas/educacion/recursos/NESCB-2014_web.pdf

-Propuesta curricular para la educación obligatoria 2016, México.

<https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/docs/Propuesta-Curricular-baja.pdf>

¹⁷ In Spanish in the original version: “superar la brecha entre el currículo como intención y los mecanismos para hacerlo operativo”.



¹⁸ In Spanish in the original version: “los alumnos en un primer momento juegan el rol de meros espectadores para posteriormente pasar a convertirse en “conejiillos de indias” del nuevo currículum que se les suministrará”.

¹⁹ In Spanish in the original version: “el currículo está centrado en el alumno”.

²⁰ In Spanish in the original version: “está relacionada con la ejecución de rutinas en la institución, rutinas intersubjetivas que legitiman, de manera sutil y no tan sutil, prejuicios, valores poco defendibles, discriminaciones solapadas”.

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