

The Culture and the Mexican Basic Education Curriculum

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Thinking about unavoidable topics for the curriculum in Latin America is interpreted in this paper as the opportunity to observe some challenges that the curriculum faces within the field of knowledge, educational policy and/or school practice.

Particularly, this paper addresses the curriculum as an educational policy in the field of Mexican basic education, exchanging a discussion on culture.

In this regard, curricular policies as a whole can be understood as instances of cultural mediation between the meanings, senses, and directionality of the school's program as a device of modernity. As a consequence of the radical transformations in the political and economic landscape, in the terrain of the values, ideas, and customs that make up the social fabric of today, the sense, and character of the school are being questioned, and therefore, the curricular policies.

One of the most relevant aspects of this moment of social fragmentation is related to the recovery of the interpretation of the cultural dimension of social life as an axis of understanding of human interactions. This interpretation from the cultural (Echeverría, 2001) of political and social life is particularly important because it occurs precisely at a time of epochal breakdown, of radical, profound, generalized and vertiginous changes in shaping the identities of societies.

The culture is present at all times as an origin, a condition of possibility that acts decisively in the collective and individual behavior of the social world, which impacts on the very march of history. The activity of society in its cultural dimension, even if it does not slow down or promote historical processes, even if it does not impose one direction or another, it is always, in any case, what it gives them meaning. (Echeverría, 2001: 17).

In this vein, studies on culture have a powerful force as a category of intellection and as a field of knowledge, in its close interaction with the relations between the political and the economic. In this case, it is aimed at a strong link with educational issues, because the symbolic products of the human interactions of a social group, that is, the set of meanings, expectations, and behaviors, if they take root and survive, it is because they manifest intense relationships that are effective in the sense of creating social fabric and in it, education is a constitutive dimension of such links or ties that build societies.

That said, these relations cannot be considered as unilateral or dependent, as the mechanistic interpretation that historical development imposed in a large part of modern thought. However, it is also not possible to replace the category of social class, by a postmodern culturalist perspective that can relativize, from the subjective, a political issue. Given all this, it makes sense because social differences have not ceased to exist by virtue of the economic level. The heart of the matter lies in locating the theoretical articulation that allows understanding, beyond economic determinism, the constitution of contemporary societies.



TO CITE THIS ARTICLE PLEASE INCLUDE ALL OF THE FOLLOWING DETAILS:

Gallardo-Gutiérrez, A. L. (2017). The Culture and the Mexican Basic Education Curriculum.

Transnational Curriculum Inquiry 14 (1-2) <http://nitinat.library.ubc.ca/ojs/index.php/tci> <access date>

That is to say, the problems concerning nationality, ethnicity, language or religion, as Bell (1998) puts forward, have an underlying dimension to some problem related to injustice and equality in the production and distribution of goods. The articulation becomes necessary to avoid this mechanistic interpretation, but at the same time recognizing the potentiality of the categories that gave meaning to that of social class: labor, bourgeoisie, proletariat, among others. They are still valid as they are articulated to the analysis of the cultural situation. Cultural phenomena cannot be considered, idealistically, as isolated entities. In order to understand them, they must be placed in the conflict of social relationships where they acquire meaning. Hence, the reality is assumed to be socially and historically constructed. This recognition does not imply, then, an analytical middle ground between one perspective and another; involves the articulation of uses of the theory in the sense of investigating the tensions that produce structures such as the educational system, and warn in these tensions its contingency, precariousness and radical historicity (Laclau, 1993, Žižek, 1998).

In the previous discussion in which this reflection is placed, its intention is to warn the existence of cultural differences that the national curriculum of Mexican basic education cannot subvert. Failures that cannot be sustained anymore since these lie, from this point of view, in that the curriculum itself is a social and historical construction, therefore, contingent and precarious. Its current moment is resoundingly showing these traits, in particular, when facing the field of cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity.

The Mexican educational system through the curriculum forges the identity that the dominant cultural referent over determines (de Alba, 2002); since the curriculum is a cultural synthesis of knowledge, values, habitus, etc. (de Alba, 1991) in tension about what is considered as national basic education.

Within this framework, it can be stated that the composition of the cultural referent of the modern Mexican educational system is based on the *myth of miscegenation* (Gallardo, 2014), generating new forms of discrimination and racism that intervene in the processes of the current educational reform, generating a paradox for the Mexican educational policy: the recognition of cultural diversity vs the institutional inability to materialize a paradigmatic shift in the new proposals for basic education training.

The review carried out by Castellanos (2003) places miscegenation as a form of racism in our country, based on the work of Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, and the thinking of Justo Sierra in his defense of the mixed race; at a time when some European racists spread the idea that miscegenation resulted in bastard populations, unable to create progress in the civilization. Although it was a progressive position, it was not immune "from falling into the trap of an orthodox social Darwinism" (Castellanos, 2003). Both authors place miscegenation at the top of the racial hierarchy; then the creole, and on an inferior scale the Indian, who is not attributed innate incapacities but is granted the benefit of redeeming himself in the miscegenation through education and nutrition (Aguirre Beltrán, 1992).

This assertion about the role of education is relevant to this paper. Although it is not an anthropological concern in the context of the study of Mexican racism, the establishment of the educational system as Althusser (1988) points out, functioned as a device of the nascent State to forge a national identity.

In post-revolutionary Mexico, José Vasconcelos will be one of the greatest exponents of miscegenation understood as Mexican racism, given that the mixture and its new products imply dis-Indianization or relation of domination to those who do not undergo to the denial of real indigenous identity or imaginary.

This ideology forms the cultural reference, in which the Mexican educational system was forged from its constitution, ritualization, development and the current crisis. This cultural reference questions and overdetermines the identity of Mexicans in training who attend basic education, in accordance with the curricular contents and textbooks that convey this ideology; specifically, the subjects of Spanish, history, mathematics and, to a lesser degree, civic and ethical education, geography and arts.

In this sense, miscegenation has had the function of significant emptiness by erasing ethnic differences in the representation of groups that are contending in the processes of curricular reform of basic education in the 21st century. Such reforms draw attention to new



ways of resignifying miscegenation as the inclusion of cultural diversity, so as a curriculum principle, or as part of the graduation profile but without concreting them in the forms of representation of other knowledge, values, and knowledge that make up the ethnic, cultural and linguistic map of the country.

In a more in-depth review of the plan and syllabuses of Mexican basic education and its textbooks, the findings regarding ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity suggest that:

- a. There is continuity in the degrees, levels, and subjects analyzed. Regarding the competence "to know and to appreciate the culture and linguistic diversity", such continuity, implies in the first place, the eradication of ethnic diversity as a signal of the power relations between cultures, particularly among those that make up Mexican identities. This removal "neutralizes" diversity, which is why in second place, through this neutralization, it opens the way to the discourse of the harmonious coexistence of society. This situation conceals an exercise of essentialization of interethnic relations creating a cultural referent. This essentialization has the effect of returning to the meta-narrative of miscegenation given that it is the empty signifier that essentializes Mexican identity, a very sophisticated form of racism.
- b. Textbooks as political products (Torres, 1989) convey this form of racism through activities and/or illustrations that show the harmonious coexistence of differences, under the discourse of coexistence and silence indigenous cultures by the signifier diversity. On the whole, they depoliticize the contents and consequently the didactic activities. This action has the effect of another form of racism because it entails the reproduction of the current referent as something natural or given. The foregoing means that the mythical effect of miscegenation in the case of Mexico tends to generate new forms of discrimination and racism.
- c. They also transmit contradictory messages regarding the relations of power in the construction of knowledge; while a field of knowledge is opened epistemologically, the possibility of legitimization for the underground knowledge that has been admitted as learning objects is closed, specifically to indigenous knowledge as possible national content.
- d. Notwithstanding the above, it can be noticed in the Civic and Ethical Education textbooks, and in the *telesecundaria*'s² Sciences textbook, a degree of advancement in the socio-critical formation of students, by explicitly showing the relationships of knowing power.

These observations give us an account of the deep crisis of the national curriculum of Mexican basic education, with respect to the way in which the nation is understood as a function significantly empty. The contents that used to give meaning to the national and the basic as hegemonic discursive chains are losing more and more ground, and with it, the impossibility of improving the quality of education received by Mexican children and youth.

Notes

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² *Telesecundaria* is an educational service intended for secondary level in remote, rural and indigenous communities. Classes are attended by a single teacher and supported by educational videos and textbooks. It is a cheap modality for those communities facing the hegemonic modality that is the conventional day school; it becomes then, a second class service and perpetuates the educational inequality.

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Transnational Curriculum Inquiry 14 (1-2) 2017
<http://nitinat.library.ubc.ca/ojs/index.php/tci>

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Submitted: November, 20th, 2017

Approved: December, 9th, 2017

