

On the Subject of Educational Policies and Curriculum Transformation in Bolivia

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to highlight some aspects of discussion about the curriculum and its political implications and practices in Bolivia. Since the 80's (1987-1994), I have been researching the curriculum in a permanent tension between multiple dimensions or components and levels that builds its definition and its action. In a way, this analysis was influenced by the neo-Marxist studies (Young, 1971; Apple, 2004; Bourdieu, 1996, to name a few), and we have discussed policies of knowledge (or cultures), or more exactly political economy of knowledge. This is complemented by the contributions of Foucault that allow investigating the relationship of the curriculum with issues of identity, subject, and power, which must also be associated with the works of Bourdieu related to concepts such as social fields, strategies, and *habitus*. Finally, in order to understand the curricular problem, education policies and in a broader perspective, the training of individuals and groups. It is necessary to expand the perspective of analysis into the relational and contextual nature of social phenomena, then it seems interesting to talk about the *ecology of knowledge*; a concept used by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2010). I am also inspired by Gregory Bateson's work (and some works of Serge Moscovici and Edgar Morin from 1970s and 80s) who developed a complex and systemic epistemology in several of their works, for example *Steps to an ecology of mind* (1985). Bateson takes the analysis of cognitive knowledge beyond cognitive anthropocentrism; in this sense, his epistemological perspective is more akin to indigenous knowledge, ordinary knowledge, etc., which are part of the cognitive challenge facing both the traditional school knowledge and rational knowledge that the Western world and science have forged over the centuries.

The theoretical and practical problems of education and the school curriculum are societies' problems in which they have been produced and reproduced. This principle, which is common, condenses various topics of discussion on the curriculum; in this brief commentary is impossible to develop them. Therefore, I am highlighting some of them for the purpose of participating in the discussion.

Bolivian context

According to UNICEF, Bolivia is not the most diverse country in Latin America and the Caribbean, but it does have, along with Guatemala and Belize, the one that has more indigenous population than the total. According to the 2001 census, more than 62.2% of the



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Bolivian population declared belonging to one of the original cultures while in the 2012 census this figure dropped to 42%. In addition this last census, already in the framework of the new Political Constitution of the State (CPE) of 2009, which recognizes 36 nations defined mainly by the language, shows that 69.4% speak Spanish, 28.7% other language of the country and 1.9% a foreign language (INE, 2015: 31-32). Finally, as in many other countries, 67.5% of the population lives in cities and 32.5% in rural areas.

Bolivia is one of the Latin America countries (along with Ecuador) which undertook a project of significant change in society for about 17 years to make a cultural and educational revolution that would speak of a "socio and community education, recovering ancestral and indigenous knowledge, "living well" as a new principle of life and coexistence, decolonization, and other features already known as a revolutionary and anti-imperialist, egalitarian, among others" (Ministerio de Educación, 2010).

This "project" was a result of various events produced in the early 2000s in which diverse and uneven forces came together to provide a favorable context and build the discourse that allowed a transformation of the country. Some of these factors were: the economic crisis with high debt of the Bolivian state; traditional political parties had come to an end in the confidence of citizens; the ideology of the welfare state had shown its limitations and the educational ideology on cultural diversity, multiculturalism, and bilingualism (which was the central element of the 1994 reform) began to be criticized from readings that arrived in the late 90s such as "postcolonial studies" (Barragan and Rivera, 1997). In this context, the social and popular demands were endorsed by discourses of "deconstruction" (Derrida, 1986), and restore the "collective memory" (Halbwachs, 2004)².

On educational and curricular policies

Nearly 10 years passed to achieve the new education law *Avelino Sinani and Elizardo Pérez* (Ministerio de Educación, 2010)³. Within the framework of the new Constitution of the State (República de Bolivia, 2009), the law raises the decolonizing purpose of the school and through it to the society that would require "new men" under the criteria that we have already stated. This would be then, a sign of educational revolution for the 21st. century in which one of the conceptual focus is "living well" (different from "living better" that would designate individual welfare within capitalist society) (Yapu, 2012), along with the recovery of ancestral knowledge and worldviews regarding Mother Earth.

Evidently, this educational and curricular proposal should be analyzed in relation to the complex, diverse and unequal Bolivian society already referred.

The recent history of Bolivian education is characterized by its openness to cultural diversity, as well as both interculturality and intraculturality; it has also emphasized the idea of "decolonization". In one of its meanings, decolonization designates the struggle for justice and social equity (an old claim) that focuses on the analysis of the curriculum from the social classes, but today also highlights the cultures and ethnic groups recognized as nations, within the Plurinational State.

Following Basil Bernstein's idea⁴, the curriculum as a selection process, legitimacy, organization, and implementation of certain types of knowledge, skills (know-how), and practices (behaviors and demeanors), as well as moral practices forming agents or individuals and social groups. It should be also considered other elements such as cultures, languages, skills, knowledge, practices, production systems, forms of government, and moral values;



typical of the different nations of Bolivia. This situation poses huge theoretical and practical problems of current educational and curricular policies.

In several previous works (Yapu, 1994; 2003; 2014), we have attempted to define the curriculum in a more operatively way based on each study. In the work of 1993 and 94 we devoted a special place to discuss this issue, but it was not included the contributions of Bateson since we did not have sufficient access to empirical analysis, nor did exist education policies that problematize decolonization, socio-productive and community education, recovery of ancestral knowledge, the “living well” as a life caring for the environment (Mother Earth), etc.; that is, elements that lead to a global perspective of the analysis. Today, such conditions exist, as the curricular discussion is invited to include new concepts such as *ecology of knowledge*, although we still lack conceptual and methodological tools.

In 1994’s educational reform, the curriculum concept was introduced and it began to be discussed between teams of technocrats and partly in universities by university professionals. While the 2010 reform has criticized this way of proceeding and has transferred the discussion to the teachers themselves, parents, indigenous wise, etc. Although it is important, we still do not know whether it is sufficient to achieve the educational revolution pursued.

On our side, the analysis of the curriculum within the evolution of society and people’s training policies (subjects, in Foucault’s sense that was studied in the educational field by Tom Popkewitz) (Popkewitz, 1998), that develop themselves in complex contexts has been proposed. These *contexts* (cf. Bateson) are no longer limited to social, political, cultural and economic fields, as commonly studied, but urges to include the environmental field (such as ecosystem), the ancestral, every day or ordinary knowledge, worldviews that are not simple ideologies (used in one of the Marxism senses) (Eagleton, 2005; Zizek, 2003).

The new curricular proposal of the Ministry of Education (ME, 2012) assumes as the core of the new development paradigm based on “living well”, the intra-interculturality and decolonization, that is, respect for the environment and indigenous community life, promotion of intraculturality and interculturality in education and society itself; and for this, one of the strategies seems to be the *decolonization* as a complex and multidimensional process of disassembly that we cannot describe in this text⁵.

Some final thoughts

To conclude and to illustrate the challenges of this multidimensionality of socio-productive and community education, we emphasize some issues that should be the subject of reflection.

a) It is sometimes said that the subjects (children, Indians, women or others) were absent from education policies. This is not entirely true. What happens is that these individuals have been treated (conceived and acted) very differently in the schooling history. So the “child” (in a generic sense) was not absent of educational and curricular debates (although in Bolivia, curriculum always has been associated and reconfigure into study plans, therefore there was no debate). However, neither came to be the center of a hegemonic pedagogical model. At the end of the 19th century with the proposal of the concentric method of teaching, and later with the new school method, the child entered to the pedagogical scene but it was very ephemeral and confusing. Until the educational reform in 1994, when, under the international influence of constructivism, the child and his learning were made visible. In



the current proposal, childhood as a concept and education subject is embedded in a broader idea of the transformation of society.

b) Another recurring topic of educational policies concerns the school and its context. The well-known and recurrent criticism is that "school does not respond to context," to "reality" or to "community." In this regard, we should trace its meaning in history. How has this discourse been used, and what did it mean theoretically and empirically in educational policies? What does it mean raising a pedagogy contextualized against the development of a country's common culture and facing the school and social differentiation? At this point, the most remarkable difference was the division between rural and urban education, given the discourse of satisfying the needs of these regions, two types of education were developed quite bifurcated: a) from the beginning of the republican life (1825), the division was *de facto* because education for indigenous people was practically nil while urban education began to be organized; b) the reform of the liberals at the beginning of the 20th century put into debate how to educate the indigenous and what kind of knowledge to impart, taking into account the demands of modernization of national education; c) with the national revolution of 1952, the Bolivian Education Code of 1955 clearly separated rural from urban education; that to this day has not been able to overcome.

c) Currently, this "context" topic, beyond the social and economic character, introduces the demand to respond to cultural and linguistic diversity, with intracultural and intercultural education in order to live well. Therefore, the curriculum must take into account the linguistic, cultural, and other conditions of all the nations of the plurinational State. And further on, in the political sphere, it must also know the forms of government of the peoples and nations, the conceptions of women and children, for example, since the relations between groups and generations of these nations are not articulated directly and simple with the rules issued by the State. This is important if the new imagined society really intends to generate new alternatives to "modern democracy".

d) In the productive field, the task is to reconceptualize the very idea of "production" that is often restricted to its sense of production of material goods; an issue that is not new but requires systematic work, in the light of the contributions of political or economic anthropology. For example, in the field of technical and vocational education, which is fairly strengthened at present, this education continues to be limited to the work-employment versus education relationship and the functional criterion to the "employability" labor market system has not been exceeded; a well-known discourse and heir of the industrial societies that clearly limits the global vision of the person.

Notes

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² An example that illustrates this claim by using the memory was the film, "The insurgents" (2012) by Jorge Sanjinés, one of the most committed filmmakers to social struggles. His film presents a recent perspective on Bolivia's main indigenous struggles.

³ These two characters were the promoters of the indigenous schools in the early 1930s. The first one is an Aymara Indian, and the second one an urban *mestizo*, trained in one of the first cohorts at the Bolivia's first national teachers' school founded in 1909 by Georges Rouma, the head of the "Belgian mission."

⁴ Since the late 80s, we have been investigating the curricular subject through educational reforms (Belgium and Bolivia). While we start from this concept of Bernstein, our vision has evolved specific nuances and



supported by readings of Michael Young (in most organizational and operational terms); the contributions of research on the interactions of teaching and learning courtly (supported by the trends on ethnography of communication and ethnomethodology). Readings on the history of school subjects and social history, and school knowledge, for example, the work of André Chervel, Ivor Goodson, Lucie Tanguy, Bernard Charlot, etc.; the contribution of studies on educational micropolitical policies from authors like Stephen Ball; or other more structural studies such as Kliebart (USA), Bourdieu, Foucault; without forgetting the Latin American studies conducted mainly in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico or Spain, countries that have provided ideological and political trends and influence Bolivian educational and curriculum policies.

⁵ Around this topic, much has been written among scholars and Latin American intellectuals. See, for example, studies on "decoloniality" Walch, Mignolo, Quijano, etc. However, to our knowledge, this range of tests rarely discuss specific issues of educational and curricular practices, therefore little can be discussed.

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