

# Curricular Decolonization from Epistemologies of Diversity<sup>1</sup>

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Curriculum, although it has an intrinsically value-based background, is widely thought of as an artifact, reducing it to a technical status. Curriculum is spoken of as a product and its discussion and dialogue is constrained, making it into a monologue where it is intended to impose an epistemological monism. The curriculum cannot be treated just as an artifact, because it must take charge of what contents to teach and why they should be taught, the purpose and aims to be achieved in education, because otherwise its discussion or design is not admissible (Null, 2016; Pinar, 2014). In this scenario, there is evidence of the need to open the conversation and the exchange of the explicit and unforeseen purposes of curriculum, to move forth at a culturally sensitive understanding of the social context and the role that the curriculum plays in it, as a symbolic link between present, past and future and multidisciplinary and intercultural dialogue (Pérez-Gómez, 1999; Pinar, 2014; Popkewitz and Brennan, 1998). Chile has not been unaware of the social changes that mobilize the processes of curriculum and has tried to keep up with them through laws and reforms.

In this sense, it is proposed for the Chilean curriculum the need to move towards inclusion and equity and to recognize the multiculturalism from the perspective of learning for the enrichment and transformation of the students' trajectories (Law 20.370, 2009), but in reality, completely different phenomena manifest. This curricular decontextualization in its practical interpretation reproduces discourses and normalizing models that do not carry out a dialogue between knowledges, but the maintenance of power relations that reduce sociocultural diversity (Quilaqueo et. al, 2014). Those misunderstandings between the different curriculum levels appear to be subjected to a cultural racism -a colonial matrix- which invisibilizes other knowledges and ways of conceiving the world under biased conceptions of what is considered valid as knowledge, science and history (Quijano in Mignolo, 2006). The colonization of this matrix is exercised through the curriculum, which is an instrument that organizes perceptions and ways of acting in the world and superimposes global and capitalist thinking as superior (Dussel, 2001; Popkewitz and Brennan, 1998; Quilaqueo et. al, 2014). In the developmental neoliberal concept, the colonial matrix demands changes from the society but also needs to maintain the status quo, and the answer for that necessity is to reform and reshape curriculum.

Since education is a sociohistorical and cultural process, the multiplicity of temporalities that occur in it form a constellation, where each of the involved spheres is interrelated with the others, forming a universe of significance with inherent features, with multiple subjects that have different characteristics, spaces, times, and visions from which they construct their realities. Educational changes and reforms are presented in terms of cause and effect and they are reactive, because it is impossible to predict what will be needed in a country that is developing at a pace that is not in keeping with the dynamic process of change in society and their knowledges (Zemelman, 2001). It is



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intended to change the mentality of a society through laws and reforms, but the reality is that there is a gap between the development of theories and laws and their praxis.

In this futuristic and changing orientation, instrumental conceptions of the curriculum were originated and through accountability, turned the curriculum into a means to reach an end: to link it with the economy with the language of objectives and standards, instead of worrying about its content and relevance with respect to the local context, nullifying its particular characteristics and the plural composition of the countries (Olivé, 2009; Pinar, 2014). This self-assigned position of power obliges to implant this conception of the world to those considered inferior, denying their value by considering them incapable, ill and ignorant (Mignolo, 2006). By doing this, the powerful makes the dominated to think with his rationale, managing to alienate and manipulate them with knowledges that are not connected to their natural and social context (Herrera and de la Paz, 2017; Freire, 2008). Curriculum, as connective tissue that is supposed to link diverse identities, expectations and realities is not woven by the ones who are -afterwards- held accountable for the cohesiveness and alignment of its different levels. Therefore, different discourses and practices collide between the written, taught, learned and lived curriculum.

The system says to promote an educational ideal of inclusion, social mobility, personal fulfillment and liberation. The recently enacted Chilean Inclusion Law<sup>3</sup> (2) (MINEDUC, 2018; Law 20.845, 2015), although it considers equitable access to education, continues to conceive it from a neoliberal perspective, with terms such as "freedom to choose". Inclusion is cut and conditioned to model imaginaries and cover up these incongruities until they are tolerable, behind a rhetoric of democracy, citizenship and equality (Rivera, 2010), hindering the possibilities of generating knowledge and becoming aware of the processes of power that deny diversities and their cultures (Ball, 1993). As a consequence, it becomes difficult to establish a dialog when all parties involved speak different languages and have different meanings of concepts such as, for instance, inclusion and interculturality.

Although -gradually- intercultural and inclusive visions have become part of the Chilean curriculum, colonizing dynamics are still legitimized. Curriculum does not reflect a dialogue between cultures, but a process of inculturation, acculturation (García Garduño in Pinar, 2014) and the denial of the minorities, their visions and knowledge. These are the great absences of curriculum and the construction of knowledge that resides in it, expropriating and incorporating the other-different in a totalizing system that does not allow its legitimation (Young in Popkewitz and Brennan, 1998) but rather an epistemological contempt for their knowledge (Olivé, 2009). This disregard from the curriculum towards the knowledge provided by the diverse epistemologies puts at risk the full exercise of citizenship and the democratic access to a quality education, respectful for their rights and singularities. One of many examples of this are the illiteracy levels, school failure and dropouts of the Deaf<sup>4</sup> population in Chile, due to a system which applies methodologies based on phonology and oralism to people who live, understand and think the world in a visual-gestural reality (Herrera and de la Paz, 2017). The vision and experience of the Deaf is not taken into account, and the education models are ways of rehabilitation, control and discipline the body: the spoken word gains a higher value and the sign language and culture are colonized and submitted.

Curricular design, thought by the "hearing" society, does not listen or see to what the survivors of the epistemic genocide have to say about their ways of reaching knowledge; therefore, the curricular conversation must be a dialogue of diversities that recognize and legitimize each other, as well as learn from each other, under equal conditions (Levinas, 2003) and where the difference is not pathologized, but considered as a different way of understanding and learning. The Deaf and blind learn and understand the world from their reality, from the meanings that their diverse bodies bring to their



experience. That same experience, the traveled path, the lived curriculum (Pinar, 2014) is the contribution that these epistemologies of diversity can offer to education, which is, from their point of view, not hearing and not aware of the value of their experience. Diversities can and should share their forms of access to knowledge and representation, beyond the border between experiential knowledge and science, since they allow both to be valued in order to broaden collective understanding and educational practices (Robinson and Henner, 2017). Hence, diversity becomes a necessary step in a new and comprehensive view about what is and what could be taught and learnt.

Curriculum colonization is manifested in the process of configuration of its contents, the decisions made related to what contents are more valuable and who makes those decisions. The nature and constitution of what is considered as knowledge lies in the effect that it produces on institutional practices, making its idea of the true susceptible to criticism, in order to question its prevalence over other versions of reality (Foucault in Ball, 1993). For Anglin-Jaffe (2015) the ways of teaching and the language used in education and curriculum are both ideological and territorial practices, because they prioritize only the development of some contents and restrict others; in the case of the Deaf, the majority spoken language is prioritized instead of promoting the use of sign languages. If the goal is to reconstruct the culture without biases, the criteria that guide the selection of contents should be contextualized (Pérez-Gómez, 1999) and recognize the existence of multiple forms of knowledge of life, matter, what is thought from the spheres of power and what is conceived from the others that do not belong to them (De Sousa Santos, 2010). Social prejudices, technocracy and neoliberal ideology have placed barriers that make curricular design inaccessible by majorities and minorities (UNESCO, 2001). The resignification plays, therefore, a key role when collective knowledge in education is constructed from a new paradigm that considers the social and geographical context where it is developed and to include in this process the diverse actors involved. Not considering the contributions that can be collected from the invisibilized epistemologies in curricular design, denies the right that all people have to reach their personal and collective fulfillment.

For Olivé (2009), epistemology is a discipline that analyzes cognitive-epistemic practices, which generate, apply and evaluate different forms of knowledge. Such epistemic practices can only be understood if they are thought of as social practices, performed by agents who have ends determined by themselves, specific means to achieve them and their own criteria for evaluating them. This applies to curriculum in the sense that it should be understood as a social practice located in unique and specific contexts, which belongs to those who live it. The colonial metaphor serves to illuminate the inequalities generated by the curriculum and allows the possibility of decolonizing the limiting discourses in educational practices (Anglin-Jaffe, 2015). When each of the actors involved in the act of educating reaffirm their identities -their epistemologies- they are capable of investigating, producing and rescuing knowledges, visualizing them and translating them into dialogical and horizontal curricular construction and pedagogical practices, consistent with their individual and community living. An example of this is the Intercultural Bilingual Education for the Deaf in Chile. It is an alternative based in the dialog between cultures and active participation of the adults who are role models, educators and co-educators, where the subjects are taught in Sign Language and Spanish is taught as a second language (Herrera and de la Paz, 2017), instead of the regular integration model, where the Deaf student is located in a classroom where the majority is hearing and the class is spoken. In the last case, effective dialog and communication is denied and the Deaf student loses his identity, instead of opening the conversation and confront curriculum as a constant process where experiences need to be seen, felt, heard, shared and criticized instead of being just heard and unquestioned.



In short, the possibility of decolonizing curriculum depends on the ability to decolonize actions, gestures and language with which reality is approached (Rivera, 2010). That everyone exercise the right to feel and hear reality from the culture of the blind, visualize the world and express feelings and knowledge from corporeality in the Deaf epistemologies, reach the deep understanding of the human being and its possibilities from a gender perspective; understand the worldviews of indigenous peoples through their knowledge, philosophy, traditions, music, dance, to reach the identity pluriversality in education, considering the intersectionality in which this multitude of facets and dimensions conform the identity of each one of these diversities (Crenshaw in Dunne, 2013). Epistemologies of gender, disabilities, native peoples and other marginalized identities join in challenging the "dictatorships of truth" that oppress them and reinforce the dominant order (Robinson and Henner, 2017). This union places them in a position of equality of conditions when proposing reforms to education and making available the cultural heritage they have collected from their perspective of the world, placing diversity as an identity feature instead of a deficit or disease, that generates knowledge and is able to dialogue with other diversities and their knowledges, which coexist without merging, but complementing and reproducing themselves (Rivera, 2010). This diverse knowledge develops beyond the limits and boundaries of colonization (Dussel, 2005), which challenges and calls for shared responsibility and power, no longer from the perspective of an "other" but of a "we" (Levinas, 2003) and redefines the assumptions that are transmitted as true knowledge to generate new points of view with which the whole society can benefit and diversify.

Diversity is not a characteristic belonging to others, but inherent in the individuality and uniqueness of the human being and that everybody possesses to share this nature. It may be asked if it is permissible to draw limits between one and the other instead of thinking of an "all"; this is a conscious, courageous and loving act that makes collective knowledge independent, achieves the union for cultural action from historical experience and resignifies reality completely (Freire, 2005). It moves from an epistemic lobotomy to an epistemological pluralism, a space where diverse worlds can coexist (Mignolo, 2006, Olivé, 2009). These worlds are born from the depths of individual and collective thinking and from the meanings that each one, from their own experience, can bring (Freire, 2005) and critically question what is normal and what is not in the dynamics of power that occur in the curriculum (Popkewitz and Brennan, 1998); creative instrument of culture that should be built by all, but disables by denying the diverse realities, experiences and bodies.

Including diversity as part of the criteria which guide the curricular design is a step to decolonize a curriculum that is thought with a standardized vision of human being. UNESCO (2001) proposes diversity as a need for exchange, innovation and creativity that should be used for the benefit of current and future generations to improve the curricular construction in this new social paradigm, to deconstruct the privileges imposed by epistemic monism (Dunne, 2013). Chilean curricular design invisibilizes the multiple diversities and their knowledge, because it starts from the denial of the other (Johnson-Mardones, 2015) instead of considering that people can appropriate all available knowledges, both those of universal and traditional value and that they are capable of generating the necessary skills to better understand their problems (Olivé, 2009). In this line, Deaf epistemologies pose the existence of differences in the ways of learning. It is questioned that most of the methodologies of teaching the deaf pathologize the non-hearing, instead of considering deafness a cultural and identity characteristic (Herrera and de la Paz, 2017). The denial of access to the deaf to the majority knowledge in the colonizing logic of the "hearing" society has been justified, leaving a large number of people without a language. Only to the extent that the Deaf relieved their culture and



knowledge through sign languages, they have been able to engage the creation of educational systems designed for the needs of the colonized, not those of the colonizers (Ladd, 2005). For there to be diversity in educational dialogue, the curriculum and teaching methods must change, as well as the contents, structures and approaches (UNESCO, 1994). For this reason, all members of society, in a critical and reflective spirit, must participate in the act of creatively recreate knowledge from their own epistemologies, because cultural differences are inseparable from their democratic context (UNESCO, 2001). Decolonization, if not in the very act of educating, becomes a mere exercise of theorization isolated from reality.

Curriculum decolonization is not simply making the curriculum accessible to those who learn it -as a space of inclusion or exclusion- but to reconceptualize it as a space for dialogue where the voice of those who teach and learn can be seen and expressed in a permanent critical praxis at all levels of curriculum, not a mere mirroring exercise of the mainstream curriculum, which would be to fall into the acceptance of a gesture of philanthropy from the colonizers to the colonized (Anglin-Jaffe, 2015). Curriculum decolonization must not only be a theoretical, intellectual or merely normative effort, because there cannot be a discourse of decolonization without practice (Rivera, 2010) or an epistemological opening of curricular design without dialogue. It is not to demolish the established, but to mobilize the imposed limits of the colonization of thought and that curriculum offers the opportunity to debate and scrutiny the existing alternatives, in order to understand the meaning of them (Pérez-Gómez, 1999) and critically question the diverse realities that coexist in the world. In the challenge of relearning and thinking about education from subjects and their differences, epistemological pluralism considers the different ways of responding to the world, the conceptions of the self and the rules that order its perceptions. It is a critical, utopian and analytical alternative to see reality and understand the conditions in which knowledge is created and reproduced (Mignolo, 2006; Olivé, 2009; Popkewitz and Brennan, 1998). Epistemological pluralism in curricular design favors the ability to understand others, empathy, critical thinking and creativity, possibilities that a colonized system cannot deliver. Gathering ways of teaching and learning from the deaf, blind and other diversities and using them with respect from their origins helps to construct conscious educative processes with a broaden understanding of humankind.

The new challenge for Chilean education is, therefore, to know, consider and embrace these diverse epistemologies in order to decolonize curricular design from the classroom and school communities, project themselves to the whole society and make us all sharers in this different way of standing up against reality and thus arrive at a new understanding of the world and of the social constructions created by us. It is not just asking for consent to make changes but using our own hands and frames of mind to do so. Curricular decolonization lives in the efforts of the teachers, students and communities who become conscious of the diversity, share and visibilize their education practices with others who are not familiar with their reality.

The answers to the recurrent questions that are made about education are not necessarily out there, as they pretend to make us believe: they are closer to us than we think. The starting point is to accept and recognize ourselves and those who walk by our side as diverse beings, as we are, with our vices and virtues. To sum up, through the opening of the curricular dialogue to the repudiated and colonized minorities, curriculum can be mobilized and democratized (Pinar, 2014) in order to decolonize itself from incapacitating and reductionist conceptions that disable the possibilities to learn the world without imposed limits.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A previous version of this work was presented at the 2018 IAACS World Conference.

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<sup>3</sup> Ironically, while writing this work, the Chilean right wing, supported by the government of Sebastián Piñera, is currently proposing a bill to undo this law, promoting selection processes instead of equitable access for all.

<sup>4</sup> In Deaf Studies, there is a difference between “deaf” and “Deaf”. The last one represents an identity exercise of the Deaf community, which leaves behind deafness as a defect and relieves the concept of Deaf Gain, the value of being Deaf and the inputs that Deafhood offers to an audiocentric world (see Ladd, 2005 and Bauman & Murray, 2014 in *Deaf gain: Raising the stakes for human diversity*). Due to this, the word “Deaf” was written in capital letters, to recognize the knowledges that Deaf communities bring to the society as a whole.

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