

# Curriculum in International Contexts: for a Meditative Agenda to Live Without Fear

**Hugo Heleno Camilo Costa<sup>1</sup>**  
**Federal University of Mato Grosso, Mato Grosso, Brazil**

KUMAR, A. (2019). *Curriculum in international contexts: understanding colonial, ideological and neoliberal influences*. Palgrave Macmillan: New York.

[...] *the counterposition of local and global resonates with an equation of the local with realness, with local place as earthy and meaningful, standing in opposition to a presumed abstraction of global space*. Massey (2005)

Ashwani Kumar's book provides a unique approach to curriculum studies because curricular thinking is so closely associated with his academic career and because of the geographical considerations that underpin his interpretation of the topic. For him, the intertwining of such elements explains his commitment to the field of curriculum and his attention to the different dynamics that influence the production of a curricular experience that is always unique to the subjects, but that can also be read in a global context, by understanding economic, political and ideological factors.

The path chosen by the author is shaped by how global forces institute directives for local curricular experiences as well as the ways in which different regional and local responses shape curriculum policies. Along this path, he offers discussions of global concepts such as neoliberalism (with its corporate lexicon), based on the perspectives of competition, comparison, management, reduction of autonomy and creativity, and focus on measurement. By using a variety of experiences, case studies, and theorizations that interact with global perspectives, and using different scales, places, and worldviews, Kumar helps us understand how curriculum is produced under intense political, cultural and religious conflicts, and through the ideological control of teachers, students, curricula, and communities. These tensions, according to the author, highlight the debates surrounding colonialism, racism, sexism, and gender, and emphasize the intersections and ruptures between the global and the local.

The author has undertaken a presentation of a wide range of curriculum policies, enabling us to visit a variety of curricular thinking enacted in different regions and countries with him. This brings us into close contact with the way the production of theory occurs in unique and enriching ways in different parts of the world. Unique, because theoretical production occurs as a continuous response to society; enriching, because exposure to global readings of the world tends to lead us to conceptualise these struggles for meaning more deeply, and to see their relationship to the varied challenges we deal with in our own reflexive tasks.



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

Costa, Hugo Heleno Camilo (2020). Curriculum in international contexts: for a meditative agenda to live without Fear, *Transnational Curriculum Inquiry* 17 (1) p. 95-100 <http://nitinat.library.ubc.ca/ojs/index.php/tci> <access date>

To follow Kumar's itinerary is to follow a tour of what it is and what can be curriculum, through interaction with readings from around the world. This interpretative experience, marked by the relationship with otherness and momentary truths, can find resonance in Doreen Massey's conception (2008) that space is constituted as a "simultaneity stories-so-far", whose consequences are unpredictable and with connections that may be absent. This is an interesting view that the work offers to the reader: while general perceptions of the world may be widely spread, personal interpretations are constructed in very diverse ways.

These impressions begin with Chapter 1, which introduces us to Kumar's journey as an international educator with twenty years of research in the field of education and leads us to approach different themes that have helped the author to develop his view of curriculum studies. The trajectory of his ways of thinking began with his entry into the field of Geography, from which he began to build an integrated perspective of the world, with dynamics and disturbances that are caused by colonial perspectives of economic growth that plague Indigenous cultures and the environment, causing impacts on a range of levels and scales. The contributions of geographical thinking led him to see commonality among a seeming range of perspectives which were breeding many evils within humanity. In a search for the construction of a different world view for the future, the author incorporates a consideration of spirituality and meditation in his questions relating to the vision of economic development that guides international policies. With this, he offers the opportunity for us to consider that the lack of awareness of ourselves and our relationships with each other and nature lead to a crisis of human consciousness that has caused chaos in all spheres of life, from local to global.

Kumar highlights the influences of Freire, Giroux, and Krishnamurti – thinkers who have made a significant impact on him through their way of thinking about the world and of the purposes of education. Like them, Kumar invests in a holistic approach in which he seeks to think about the relationship of human needs and consciousness in relation to a whole set of global aspects (e.g., economic and political). In this way, Kumar brings our attention to a vision that seeks to overcome the structuralist readings or fragmentary tendencies of politics using an existentialist and meditative logic.

In this interpretative approach, the author ponders the impact of ideology, neoliberalism, and colonialism on curricular thinking and proposes a consideration of Indigenous, critical, autobiographical, and meditative responses as means of confronting these hegemonies. The first of these implies a movement toward decolonizing education implying challenging the oppressive, colonial processes and attending to generational traumas, through the affirmation of ancestral cultural roots and histories that constitute cultural heritage. This response is characterized by a multifaceted spiritual movement of reconnection with culture and nature; this would include peace, harmony and holism as an attitude in life, and in the processes of learning and teaching. The second, a critical response, invites us to grasp an understanding of the different academic contributions that help to criticize the ideologies that guide curricular production. Such response helps in the denaturalization of truths and in the fight against prejudice, injustice and discrimination in the classroom and in social life in general. A third response, autobiographical, constitutes an engagement in a psychoanalytical, phenomenological and existential approach to the curriculum, seeking to give consideration to the subjectivity at the center [core] of the curricular experience. It is an introspective process, focusing on cultural, intellectual, religious and political influences, which, according to the author, would help the researcher to connect to the deleterious influences of colonization, ideology and neoliberal logic of control. The meditative response consists of a search for deep understanding of the consciousness of human nature. This would lead to a move toward



fundamental consciousness that connects us all through our shared existence and which presently is marked by conflicts and antagonisms. Through this perspective, the author considers that it is possible to tap into a collective consciousness, capable of fighting prejudice, sectarianism and other negative influences in education at a deeper level within human beings. For Kumar, these responses, as a platform for reflection on the curriculum, provide opportunities for new ideas and worldviews. Throughout the following chapters, the author focuses on the curriculum studies of different countries.

In Chapter 2, entitled "Curriculum Studies in South Africa: Colonialism, Constructivism, and Outcomes-Based Education", the author notes that both India and South Africa are former European colonies which marks a certain similarity in curriculum policies. One common feature is the import of European educational solutions that are dissonant with local realities and lead to increased discrimination against local knowledge and identities. High rates of illiteracy, malnutrition, poor teacher training, and lack of infrastructure, are also common to both countries. The first section addresses the historical colonial roots that mark South Africa's educational history. Influences are highlighted that harken back to visions of education related to slavery and also to those linked to the apartheid period; however, the author points out various conflicts that have led to changes in the curriculum policy, in a movement to critique Eurocentric conceptions of education and what it means to be educated in South Africa. In the second part, he draws attention to a post-apartheid scenario, with internal tensions that are defined by the struggle of different segments of society to overcome the social injustices constructed by historical segregationism. This period is informed by progressive, constructivist and outcomes-based theorizations. The chapter also addresses how recent curricular reforms are guided by a drive toward outcomes, instrumentalism and managerialism in education, leading to a dissonant construction of the contemporary reality of the country which demonstrates the permanence of a colonial logic in curricular politics, updated by neoliberal senses. Along with these dynamics, a critical and democratic movement is emphasized that reiterates the importance of valuing local culture, daily knowledge, and the affirmation of a pedagogy constituted from and for South African values.

The third chapter, "Curriculum Studies in Brazil: Marxism, Postmodernism, and Multiculturalism," addresses the development of curriculum studies in Brazil, emphasizing three main moments of Brazilian thought: a pre-Marxist, Marxist, and a post-Marxist. For Kumar, the first moment was marked by the strong influence of Tyler's and Bruner's thinking, with intense instrumentalist and psychological/cognitivist appeal. The period of greatest influence of Karl Marx's thinking was characterized by studies that sought to directly connect education with the processes of social development. Concepts such as power, ideology, and hegemony gained strength as interpretative instruments of the curriculum, and educators applied sociological approaches to study curriculum. Such theorizations were constituted as criticisms of the instrumental reading of the curriculum and, consequently, of the processes of exclusion caused by traditional and behaviorist views. The centrality of the debate on the processes of selection and legitimization of knowledge in the curriculum characterizes a significant portion of intellectual efforts in the period. It is also emphasized that the movements related to Marxist thought had different forms and approaches, mixing theorizations of phenomenology and existentialism, for example. The post-Marxist time period has been influenced by post-critical, post-structuralist, and post-colonial discourses. Such worldviews brought themes such as subjectivity, difference, gender, race, everyday life and identity to the curricular debate, mainly from the mid-1990s. For the author, the actuality of Brazilian curricular thinking signals a coexistence of different theoretical approaches, revealing, through the conception of hybridity, a key for different visions that highlight the curriculum as cultural production.



In the chapter “Curriculum Studies in Mexico: Technical Rationality, Curriculum Communities, and Neoliberal Globalization”, the author constructs a vision of the development of Mexican curriculum thinking with attention to three main phases, the first of which is characterized by the importation of technicist and behaviorist logic of curriculum modeling. In this first phase, the author highlights the significant volume of translations of North American works into Spanish; this would signal an American imperialist movement with regard to the formulation of curriculum policies in the country. From the 1970s onwards, with the influence of European and Latin American critical thinkers, the number of studies grew that criticize the import of solutions and curricular programs from the United States, under the accusations of the lack of attention to the context Mexican reality. During this period, critical, constructivist, and interpretative theorizations and the discussion on professional development began to form part of the curricular debate in the country. Critical curricular studies in Mexico constituted a dialogue with different theories such as the new sociology of education, reconceptualization, reproduction theory, pedagogy of freedom, among others—producing a multifaceted field of studies focused on different Mexican social issues. Despite this, economic crises and the consequent dependence on foreign capital led the country to undergo strong curricular reforms focused on the defense of education for market in the logic of global capitalism. For Kumar, the current state of school curriculum in the country is significantly oriented towards instrumental and behaviorist views of education, guided largely by global educational reforms and related conceptions of innovation, skills, flexibility and outcomes.

In chapter 5, Kumar gives consideration to curriculum studies in Asia. Entitled “Curriculum as a Process of Conditioning in Asia: Ideology, Politics, and Religion”, the chapter draws attention to different case studies, demonstrating distinct processes involved in curriculum production of countries in the region. Based on these studies, he outlines three focal points that mark the influence of religious, cultural, ideological and political aspects of curriculum reforms in these countries. From an ideological point of view, the author highlights the cases of Japan, Hong Kong, Afghanistan, Malaysia, South Korea, as being emblematic. He points out how different political movements fight for greater influence in educational policy, seeking to control curricular proposals, the preparation of textbooks, and teacher education; this reiterates the description of curriculum field as being characterized by continuous conflicts over the definition of the purposes of education. The second focus, which encompasses the tension between nationalism, globalization and moral values, includes the cases of moral education in China, the inclusion of *Kokoro* Education in Japan, the ideological debate on the incorporation of moral values in Singapore, and the defense of values such as harmony and docilization in Macau, as well as the debate on national identities in educational reforms in Vietnam and the Philippines. The author points to the exploration of moral education as an instrument of hegemonic ideologies in each country as being at the heart of the matter, to justify repression, educational control focused on the market and/or, with the expectation of valuing pride and national culture in readings on globalization. The third focus points to the religious influence on curriculum reforms in Pakistan, India and Malaysia. Such reforms led to a setback with regard to human rights, the way knowledge is conceived of, and the objectives of national education. Within these movements, there has been significant influence from fundamentalist and non-fundamentalist religious groups which advocate fighting against Westernization and other religious views. Throughout the chapter, the impacts of political and religious ideologies on national curriculum production are outlined. In this sense, there is a recurrent sense of reaffirmation of West-East binarism, with criticisms of foreign values, and strong opposition to critical freedom in some countries. On the other hand, a globalization of opportunities for participation in the world economy is



reiterated, with support for educational policies for internationalization. The chapter provides a heterogeneous panorama of how different discourses are articulated in different countries, building unique policies.

In the following chapter, “Indian Social Studies Curriculum in Transition: Effects of a Paradigm Shift in Curriculum Discourse”, the case of social studies in the Indian curriculum is highlighted. Kumar focuses on the conflict of different discourses on the teaching of social studies, drawing attention to the changes in the conceptions of this field of knowledge between the reforms of 2000 and 2005. For the author, in the last reforms there was a change of perspective, from a traditional view of instruction in social studies to a vision of critical social studies. Specifically, the author uses data from research conducted with schoolteachers to reflect on how such changes are related to their professional practices. Throughout the investigation, he highlights the difficulties and successes of teachers during the most recent reforms which provided more critical and experiential perspectives of teaching and learning, creating better conditions for critical thinking and questioning in the educational experience. Despite this, it points to problems that are gaining momentum in the educational system, such as: the idea that the role of social studies is to transmit defined concepts about citizenship and society that reiterates a transmission-based logic; the lack of adequate education for teachers; and the lack of infrastructure for teaching based on constructivist principles in schools. In addition, Kumar points to the strong influence of the perspective of seeing education as preparation for outcomes and exams, in a behaviorist-positivist logic of the curriculum, with the consequent support for the reiteration of apolitical and atheoretical readings on the process of schooling. For the author, despite the improvements that have been made, it is necessary to seek to overcome the difficulties mentioned, so the project of social justice and democracy through the Indian educational system can be strengthened.

The seventh chapter, called “Postmodern Turn in North American Social Studies Education: Considering Identities, Contexts, and Discourses”, is a discussion about the contribution of post-structural and post-modern thinking to research and teaching in the USA and Canada. The author discusses concepts that make up postmodern thought, emphasizing the contributions of such theories in the field of social studies and highlighting the significance of reflective, critical and democratic engagement. Themes such as the truth, the family, normativity, the individual, subjectivity and the power relations involved in the production of knowledge are investigated through various case studies. For Kumar, the contributions of post-structural and post-modern studies have repositioned concerns in social studies, moving them from a transmission-centered view to a critical and reflective one which takes into account the need to criticize the modern and western assumptions that guide the messianism of critical theory readings. At the end of the discussion, he concludes by highlighting the possibilities that post-perspectives bring to research and the teaching of social studies, as well as by highlighting proposals and questions about the inclusion of post-modern views in educational research, taking into account their conflicting and necessary interactions with the thoughts and perspectives of modernism.

In the last chapter, “The Menace of Neoliberal Education Reforms: Where Capitalism, Behaviorism, and Positivism Meet”, a conclusive discussion is presented on the ramifications of neoliberalism in different dimensions of social life, with special attention to how this logic impacts the field of education. As a core of his approach, Kumar points to the worsening inequalities between people and nations caused by neoliberalism, with its discourses of privatization, free markets and a reduction in the role of the state. In the political field, he points out that under this view, citizens have a reduced role and agency, which tends to make the citizen a mere spectator of political production. In the field of education, this logic leads to the formulation of policies based on corporate visions of education, with their defense of



standardized tests based on comparison, and more prescriptive and alienating curricular proposals. For Kumar, such political dynamics tend to undermine the creativity of teachers and students and control teaching and learning in schools. He points out that this can be challenged through theoretical investment in a critical educational agenda, the core of which is social justice; autobiographical attention to human consciousness and subjectivity; and a meditative conception of curriculum, which could link contributions from critical pedagogy and autobiographical studies in a quest to query the psychological roots of capitalism. The author argues that fear lies at the heart of the dynamics of competition, comparison and accumulation. Meditative questioning would call attention to the oppressive, subjective, and social relations based on competition; this movement would bring the possibility of revolution, from inner-consciousness to the external context (including economic and political structures).

I conclude with the thought that Kumar's international meditative approach offers us a variety of different impressions, such as the consideration of a broader context of economic and political- ideological influences, and an essential understanding of multiscale tensions in the production of curriculum policies. As a curriculum theorist, Kumar's unique perspective is to emphasize critical and post-critical curriculum perspectives in a quest for reflection on the impacts of global educational policies around the world. But, more than that, he proposes a deeper study of oneself and one's relationship to the educational, social, and political structures through autobiography and meditative inquiry in order to develop a holistic awareness which can allow us to be and to live without fear in the educational and the broader context.

### **Acknowledgements**

I wish to sincerely thank Bonnie Petersen for providing generous help in editing this manuscript.

### **Notes**

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<sup>i</sup> hugoguimel@yahoo.com.br

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**Submitted: June, 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020.**

**Approved: July, 27<sup>rd</sup>, 2020.**

