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### The Curriculum. Conceptual and Practical Tensions

### Currículum. Tensiones conceptuales y prácticas

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#### Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to analyze the formation of two currents in the field of curriculum. These currents, over the last century, were visualized in different ways: one which considers the educational project as linked to a system or an educational institution, a perspective expressed in the various proposals to develop study plans and programs; the other, which links it with concepts like *everyday life*, *curriculum as educational practice* and *curricular reality*, which vindicate what is happening in the educational environment, particularly in the classroom. This paper recognizes a meeting of both currents in the origins of the curriculum field in the early twentieth century; at the same time we analyze its evolution marked by mutual discrediting and ignorance that have generated tensions. It reflects on the need to identify the limitations of each current, but also to recognize their successes.

*Keywords:* curriculum, curriculum history, curriculum theory.

## Resumen

El objeto de este ensayo es analizar la conformación de dos vertientes en el campo del currículo, que a lo largo del siglo pasado se expresaron en maneras divergentes de visualización: la que lo considera vinculado al proyecto educativo de un sistema o una institución escolar, perspectiva que se expresa en las diversas propuestas para elaborar planes y programas de estudio, y la que lo vincula con conceptos como *vida cotidiana*, *currículo como práctica educativa* y *realidad curricular*, los cuales reivindican lo que acontece en el ámbito educativo, en particular en el aula. En este trabajo se reconoce un encuentro de ambas vertientes en los orígenes del campo curricular en los albores del siglo XX; al mismo tiempo se analiza su evolución marcada por descalificaciones y desconocimientos mutuos que han generado tensiones. Se reflexiona sobre la necesidad de identificar las limitaciones de cada vertiente, pero también de reconocer sus aciertos.

*Palabras clave:* Currículum, historia del currículum, teoría del currículum.

## Introduction

The curriculum field forms part of that educational knowledge over which there was much debate at the end of the last century. It is a discipline born in the shadow of the evolution of U.S. educational science to address humankind's education in the industrial age. In this discipline a group of academics is working to promote conceptual and practical development; however, their diverse analytical perspectives have evolved in a way so dynamic that they have become unpredictable because of the multiplicity of themes under discussion. It is somehow perceived that the curriculum field is going through a series of tensions, between the institutional needs that birthed it, and the different perspectives of researchers and academics.

The purpose of this study is to elucidate some of the tensions experienced by the field of curriculum, taking as a reference the formation of two currents in its genesis, in the early twentieth century, and following the evolution these currents had when this discipline was internationalized in last third of last century. Undoubtedly the effect of such globalization was the enrichment of the perspectives of its analysis which, although they have permitted curricular discipline to have its own discourse, have also generated new tensions in the field. These have produced a sort of equation between critical thinking and unintelligible thought, between criticism and an inability to address the situations of educational processes, a claim to the subject of education in which all institutional effort is unknown. The result of this tension is a kind of ignorance between the two perspectives. A perspective that orients this essay consists in finding out what is the reason behind the tension, and in asking ourselves not only about the effects it has had on the field, but also about the possibilities of finding connections between the two conflicting points of view since the time of their origin.

## **Curriculum: conceptual problem or disciplinary dimension**

The curriculum field has been developed in such a multiplicity of meanings that when one refers to this notion, s/he must necessarily clarify in what sense the term is being used. To begin this essay, we should commence by distinguishing the terms *curriculum* and *curricular discipline*. The first is the subject of an infinite number of adjectives, and of course has an enormous number of meanings. At some point we said that the concept is in the process of dissolution as a result of its polysemy. Bolívar recently described it as “a concept evaluationally biased, which means that there is no social consensus about it, since there are different options regarding what it should be” (Bolívar, 1999, p. 27). Thus we find the permanent need to add to the term an adjective that will help its conceptualization, and we do not deny that in some cases this has actually succeeded in enriching a significant and relevant nuance in the construction of meanings; e.g., hidden, formal, vivid, procedural. All these adjectives somehow allow us to understand a meaning for curriculum that goes beyond those who seek to *define* the curricular.

In this sense the word *curriculum* acquires a characteristic which likens it to other constructs in twentieth-century educational theory: evaluation and planning, which obtain precision only by means of adjectives. Learning, teachers, researchers, programs, institutions and system, in the case of evaluation; and course planning, of institutional work or the educational system. In the same way, they refer to methodological forms with adjectival expressions: systemic, formative, summative evaluation; or strategic or technical planning, by objectives. All that exists as well in the realm of the curricular: the traditionalist perspective, the critical, the integral.

It is noteworthy that the twentieth-century educational theory in its own formation, should have allowed in its development a conceptual structure that could be characterized as “postmodern.” While perhaps it makes difficult the original claim of having a clear and complete version of a knowledge by which to open the development of various disciplines (curriculum, evaluation and planning), it points out the possibility of understanding educational reality in a complex process and with unique views. In this perspective the concepts curriculum, assessment and planning are subject to a tension: that of their original rationale (efficientist, behaviorist, managerial) and the diversity imposed by what is singular, particular, “unique and unrepeatable”, of an educational act that demands to be interpreted.

However, in the case of the term curriculum, because of the multiplicity of meanings—many of those meanings assigned by adjectives—there can be produced a kind of “absence of meaning.” That is, adjectivations which ultimately express a void they cannot explain, nor address a problem in practice, accepting a compromise between the conceptual formula and the educational reality.

This is, perhaps, the wealth that has not been sufficiently reflected in the field of that educational theory; but it would explain, too, the difficulty of achieving a conceptualization that would generate a consensus among all the specialists on the topic.

However, the advantages and disadvantages generated by the conceptualization of the term *curriculum* cannot extend to its disciplinary structure. The existence of a vast literature, the attention to various objects of study in the scholastic environment: the selection, organization and distribution of contents in some perspectives; the classroom reality; the fractures, discontinuities that are generated by each school group; the distances between the intended curriculum and the one taught and lived, as well as unintended evaluative learning, demand the recognition of the existence of an articulated conceptual production based on a discipline related to it and having the task of accounting for it. This discipline is what we call the field of curriculum. A failure to distinguish between the concept and the discipline can cause the problems observed in the delimitation of the concept to call into question the development of the discipline, when the field of curriculum is an expression of the educational theory that characterized the twentieth century, that came out of the needs of the society generated by industrialization and taken up by the education sector. An educational theory—in terms closer to Dewey—for training in an industrial-democratic society.

In any case, here we can identify an initial tension in the curriculum field, where the concept and discipline appear confronted and in different epistemic dynamics.

### **Origin of the discipline. Two irreconcilable currents**

Curriculum as a discipline emerged in the early twentieth century as a result of new insights into social dynamics. Outstanding in the academic environment were the establishment of national legislation that regulated education<sup>1</sup> and structured the educational system of our day. In the production environment, the rise of the industrial society around the machine, mass production and the establishment of the monopolies; in the world of ideas, the developments in experimental psychology, the generation of the principles of scientific work management, and the development of pragmatism.

In this context, the establishment of the educational system required a discipline that would analyze the problems of teaching from an institutional point of view. Let us remember that the teaching of the seventeenth century had arisen as a discipline devoted to the study of pedagogy in an individual dimension: the teacher and his students. In fact, in the work of Comenius, La Salle, and Pestalozzi<sup>2</sup> there can be clearly seen this perspective, whose horizon is inscribed on the scholastic courses: first, second and third grade, for example, but where the school is not considered part of an educational or social system. Only after the French Revolution were laws enacted establishing compulsory primary education as a responsibility of the state.<sup>3</sup> The result of these laws was the creation of the education system. In this context, there was required a discipline which would permit a visualization of the institutional dimension of intentional education, that is, the dimension of the education system. The selection and organization of contents gradually ceased to be an individual problem of the teacher or of a religious congregation as it was in the late sixteenth century, in the schools of the Jesuits, who through the *Ratio Studiorum* (Gil, 1992) (first edition written by Father

Aquaviva in 1594) presented the educational ideals of their residents, clearly established its pedagogical project and the principal contents to be addressed in its various schools.

The emergence of curriculum as a field<sup>4</sup> in the early twentieth century, covered the need to address the problems facing education in the context of the school system. In turn, it was marked by the rise of industrialization in those years.

The curriculum environment arose with two trends<sup>5</sup> which at the end of the twentieth century showed surprising developments. One<sup>6</sup> was linked to the educational process, school experiences and development of each student. Thus, the philosopher and educator of what was known as the progressive education movement, John Dewey, wrote *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902) which proposes a learner-centered perspective, and achieved important developments concerning the role of experience in learning.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, a closer look at the institutions, i.e. at the need to establish clearly a sequence of content that would support the choice of instruction topics. The proposal was made by an engineer, a management professor, Franklin Bobbitt, who presented in 1918 his first book, *The Curriculum*, and years later, *How to Make a Curriculum* (1924).<sup>8</sup> This approach would gain force with the publication of Charter's work, *Curriculum construction* (1924).

Independently of the evolution of this debate in the United States in the late twenties (and early thirties) academics of both postures met to try to develop a point of approach that is expressed in the famous *Declaration of the Committee of the National Society for the Study of Education*.<sup>9</sup> This joint statement, followed by a series of individual essays which clarified the individual position of several of the committee members, constitutes the first serious attempt to achieve reconciliation between the two perspectives that characterize the curriculum field: that initiated by Dewey, on the student's experience; and that developed by Bobbit, and then Charter, characterized by the formal definition of the content to be taught. But the Declaration, by favoring a specific proposal on the development of curricula, did not constitute the synthesis (perhaps impossible) of both trends. Its effect on the academic community and on institutional work was twofold. First, it allowed a generalization about how to develop scholastic programs and some ideas for new educational standards (e.g., the need for standardized exams for the school system). On the other hand, it postponed the discussion of the two *schools* of curriculum theory, shifting it away from the problem of experience that would strongly emerge only at the end of the sixties.

Later, at the end of World War II, and in pursuance of an agreement<sup>10</sup> to a heated session on curricular aspects, Tyler wrote *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*,<sup>11</sup> a text with which he aimed to settle the discussions existing in the field, and at the same time, generalize a vision of curriculum, equating it with study plans and programs. In the opinion of Beyer and Liston, Tyler's book is an attempt to overcome previous visions linking the curriculum "with the prerogatives of capitalism", incorporating a social perspective that seeks to promote "human

welfare in a vision of education for democracy despite the linear/rational model underlying all its approach” (Beyer and Liston, pp. 44-49).

In reality, the vision that Tyler established prevailed in the field for almost two decades, became international in the seventies, shaping a generation of pedagogical models that influenced the educational reforms of those years in Latin America, and impacting the European educational debate in different ways. At the end of the seventies, as can be seen in the literature, the field of curriculum not only moved in a certain sense to teaching, but had a global presence. Furthermore, Beyer and Liston hold that attempts to establish “an alternative to the model established by Tyler” have not been fruitful (Beyer and Liston, 2001, p. 50).

### **The globalization of the curriculum field. The growing tension between views**

The internationalization of the discipline of curriculum was carried out initially from the perspective of plans and programs; it ceased to be the object of debate within the U.S. academic community, to receive contributions and developments from all over the world. Certainly because of the dynamics the academic community has in the so-called first world countries, these exchanges were very fruitful among intellectual groups who could communicate in English. This was the case of British, Australian, and American authors.

But this does not mean that in the Hispanic world there would not be important and significant developments. In Mexico, for instance, there were contributions to concepts such as “needs assessment” (Taba, 1974) or “sources and filters” for curriculum design when concepts were established as a frame of reference for a study plan, analysis of professional practice, object of transformation (Díaz Barriga, 1997), and there was generated a significant experience related with the so-called modular system. On the other hand, in Spain, Zabalza (1801) proposed in the eighties, the concept of “curriculum development” as opposed “curriculum design”.

Thus, the prospect of plans and programs was enriched and formed an area of debate. In the background, attention was given to one of the key issues that brought about curriculum theory: caring for the institutional needs of the education system. That is, seeing the selection of content and skills training as a problem of society as a whole, not as an aspect that pertained to explaining a particular school, or even less, a specific teacher. There was eventually imposed a radical change in the conditions of teaching performance. This was worth examining, because while in the previous educational era the teacher was responsible for thinking up both the content and teaching strategies in the curriculum, in the curricular era the teacher is responsible for knowing and mastering the established contents, and in some cases, for reviewing and selecting learning activities that specialists recommend.<sup>12</sup>

In the same way, with the generalization of this curricular perspective, attention is given to one of the nuclei of this theory, the education of the human being in the

“industrial age.” In this sense, the curriculum concept can be seen as part of the educational theory that answers to the needs created by industrialization. The concepts of efficiency and the construction of *employment* as a category that orients educational goals, replaced the purposes which the humanist view of education had made in the Kantian philosophy of the early nineteenth century. Thus, education to promote the full potential of human nature, to “give to man of the highest possible perfection,” to achieve that integral dimension: “what good is it to learn arithmetic, if you lose the pleasure of the aesthetic”—Herbart (1992) would ask—they are replaced by “educating the citizen”, “educating for the democracy”, and “educating for the job”, that is, education for solving the problems of society. In another perspective, one can confirm that this is the fundamental difference between academic tests formulated in the education sector, and the test of life skills and abilities developed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

On the other hand, we cannot forget that in the process of the internationalization of the curriculum field, the decade of the sixties had not ended when the other line forgotten in the debate was vigorously recovered. The formulation of the concept of the *hidden curriculum* (Jackson, 1968) reestablished the perspective we have called that of experience, articulating a series of learning not explicit in a curriculum, which are not intentional, but which are highly effective. This learning is the result of interaction in school and in the classroom; in this sense, it is the result of experience.

The research model developed by Jackson, along with limitations of the curricular models—or better said, of models based on developments of a behavioral-type psychology and on a model of administration—were launched in the context that allowed the rise of other views on the curriculum, closer to the interpretive and microsocial theories, and the inclusion of developments coming from microsociology or Frankfurt’s critical school. Thus, in the late seventies, there were established sociological approaches such as that of Eggleston, in England, *The Sociology of the School Curriculum* (1977),<sup>13</sup> while Michael Apple, in the United States, presented *Ideology and Curriculum* (1979), which sought to analyze critically what happens in education, incorporating into the conceptual and empirical focus the political, and to examine the actual school curriculum so as to compare it with the assumptions of educators. At bottom, this set of texts reflected the establishment of another perspective in the curriculum field. At the same time, its enrichment was evidence of its internationalization.

From that moment on, once the original veins from the curriculum field had been *reestablished*, researchers would continue going deeper and working on each of these perspectives in various ways: formal curriculum (compared to or vs.) experience, established curriculum (compared to or vs.) hidden, formal curriculum (compared to or vs.) curriculum as a process. There was even formulated “nonsense” in these categorizations when speaking of a “null curriculum.”

In this context of complexity, the field of curriculum went on being constructed as a multidisciplinary knowledge with aspects of sociology, history, administration and economics to support the study plans, as well as psychology and didactics for the program proposals that eventually were combined with contributions from anthropology and the development of “micro” knowledge (life stories, microsociology) to account for what was happening in the classroom. To all that, there was added an epistemological and philosophical vision which sought to elucidate the field’s conceptual value, or to derive concepts from it for some of the aspects of the curricular area.

Thus, the boundaries of the field were diluted and the objects of study were multiplied. However, the two views of curricular field gradually came into tension—which can be observed in several of the dynamics currently found in the curriculum area. At the international level it is very clear that the curricular approach linked with the design or development of study plans and programs been maintained at a level of lower determination—that is, it is recognized that the production of plans and programs cannot be modeled—that it seeks to orient and recover the wealth generated in every experience of producing or reformulating a plan or program of study.

The authors working on the perspective of the curriculum are aware of the institutional need not only to evaluate and reformulate the curriculum, but also to offer, based on a curriculum, a perspective that would invite teachers to innovate and organize their work of education. This reality obliges them intellectually and morally to generate or systematize proposals for producing curricula, such as training focused on the study of postgraduate curricula, in particular those of doctorates, flexible curriculum organization, the teaching skills, or the incorporation of cognitive theories such as situated education and training by means of problems. In these and other curriculum projects there is an effort to establish a renovative concept that would guide the entire faculty of an institution, inviting them to look for tactics of innovation in their educational work.

Finally, curriculum specialists are aware that the contents established in a study plan will not be followed exactly in a school setting. In fact, they strive to achieve a minimal content structure that does not always come out of their own heads, but which is the result of work carried out with a group of specialists in each of the disciplines of the plan. There is also an awareness that institutions need to promote school work based on a plan because education—in this industrial era, super-complex and with a knowledge-based society—calls for a general approach, lucid, innovative and sensible, which can be translated into a curriculum.

While on the other hand, the perspectives of the curriculum as a process, as experience or as hidden—which are different—have opened the possibility of multiple and different conceptual developments: the relationship between culture and school processes, the use of *ethnology*, called ethnography in education, to describe a multitude of events in the school setting, such as: forms of authority and pedagogical work, systems of interaction between students and evaluation. That

is, unveil the school culture from within. In a sense, the original curriculum was lost, as there is no interest in identifying the educational experiences in the classroom—only in *documenting the undocumented*.

In this context, a variety of behaviors has been generated in the academic community doomed to carry on in the curricular environment; this has provoked very different dynamics concerning the two strains we have mentioned. In general, one could speak of a sort of mutual ignorance between the two groups. For one thing, those who consider that the curriculum problem arose to promote the processes of content selection and organization serving the needs of society and the education system, think that the specialists in *everyday curriculum* show skepticism toward this activity and curriculum, and have lost the curricular perspective on the grounds that their approaches are closer to didactic settings, instructional theories, and anthropology.

Moreover, those who interpret the curriculum field from various perspectives of everyday life, discover an unexpected wealth of school life that demands to be known. Their diverse instruments of approach allow them to take into account a series of events which have not been pondered. This leads them to search for conceptualization models for this reality—models that are sometimes overdone; however, they establish a conceptual rigor in a place where what prevails is the educational event itself. Strictly speaking, we should recognize that they do not always achieve this task; nor do they offer an analysis that permits a better understanding of the educational event. This is in part because the dense conceptualizations, in the end, prevent the illumination of what happens in the classroom, and because sometimes they become lost in the description of their observations with simple and timely interpretations of complex events. Certainly they consider “absurd” the attempt to establish a curricular organization, since their studies show that there is an “anti-organization” that arises in the classroom, in everyday relations between teachers and students. Similarly they extend critical comments that ignore any other curricular option.

The consequences for the field of curriculum and for the academic community studying the topic are not the best; the two groups move back and forth between ignorance and discrediting. They need dialogue between academics from both perspectives, that although they permit the work and projection of each of these, they do not promote a necessary enrichment of the points of view. Nevertheless, in the perspective of *process curriculum* or *experience curriculum*, the national academic community has behaved in a way that is different from the international. While in the international environment a constant production is maintained in curricular perspective, in the national setting we find the specialists on these topics emigrating to other disciplines. Thus, those who used to work on those themes, today seek their development in the environment of school culture, gender studies and scholastic discipline. This was duly documented in the research we did in Mexico in the nineties, on the state of curriculum studies (Díaz Barriga, in press). Ultimately, this may lead to an impoverishment of curricular debates.

Coupled with this is the dissolution of the boundaries of the curricular discipline. The evolution of the field of curriculum and its break with the behavioral theories that led to the creation of knowledge of multiple disciplines—today it is a multidisciplinary field of philosophies, sociologies, psychologies, microsocial theories, etc.—have favored the invasion of the borders of other disciplines, or have merged with other fields of knowledge. Thus, based on the curriculum there is explored the work performance of graduates (invading the socio-economic studies and follow-ups on them); there are analyzed the occupational needs for practicing a profession (invading the sociological approaches to the professions or the economics of education); there are determined the didactic-psychological principles to be followed in schoolwork (invading the development of the psychology of learning); there is reported the behavior of a group of teachers or students toward a certain content or program (using various forms of research on microsociology and anthropology: participatory observation, ethnographic record.) Nonetheless, in these latter perspectives the field of curriculum merges completely with didactics.

The result not only affects the conceptual delimitation of the field—whose genesis, as set forth at the beginning of this essay was marked by both perspectives and the conflict between them—but also generates different behaviors in the academic community: ignorance, discrediting and disinterest for the issues and for the academics who approach each of these curricular strains.

On formulating the *deliberative theory* (Westbury, 2002) of the curriculum, Schwab established a scenario, which, facing the need to incorporate the situations of a particular scholastic dynamic and of the subjects of education (teacher and students), allowed an analysis of the theorization required for the development of the curriculum field: a theory-practice, or what is the same, he said, as the compromise between reflection and the field of action—since education ultimately is an action. On the other hand, precisely the incorporation of the perspective of the actors (teachers and students) opened the door to establishing a contact point between the two currents of the field of curriculum. The achievement of this connection is a challenge that academics addressing these studies should take more seriously.

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1 "The great reforms needed by public education were carried out only after the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 (...) following the appointment of Jules Ferry in 1879 as Minister of Education there began the true reorganization of French public education (...) the laws transformed the structure of education and influenced the education of the rest of Europe and Latin America" (Luzuriaga, 1964, p. 74).

2 *Didactica Magna* was written in 1657. The first printed edition of the *Guide to Christian Schools* dates from 1720, and *How Gertrude Teaches her Children* was published in 1801.

3 In his study of the history of public education, Luzuriaga analyzes the various laws which were issued concerning this in France in the nineteenth century, and concludes:

The great reforms needed by public education were carried out only after the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and the proclamation of the Third Republic (...) France then used education as her main instrument. (...) After the appointment of Ferry in 1879 as Minister of Education there began the true reorganization of French public education (...) between 1880 and 1883 there were established a series of laws that transformed the structure of French education that so strongly influenced the rest of Europe and Latin America (Luzuriaga, 1964).

4 It is necessary to differentiate the emergence of the term curriculum, from the rise of the curriculum field. In the first case, the word allowed the designation of a training plan, a program for life. In the second, we can identify the emergence of a discipline in the field of education science, which made it possible to address the problems of education in the industrial era, with a view to shaping education systems.

5 This aspect has been documented in the works of Díaz Barriga, A. (1995) and Furlan, A. (1996).

6 We prefer to use the names repeatedly, rather than saying "the first" and "the second", so as to avoid giving the impression of a predominance of one over the other. Both perspectives reflect a trend, and will not only be developed in various forms in the century, but will also manifest themselves in conflict and tension.

7 Certainly the development of a *theory of learning experience* would be developed more fully by Dewey himself almost twenty years later.

8 In the forties he produced a third book entitled *The Curriculum of Modern Education*.

9 This statement was translated by Luzuriaga, in 1944, under the title *The New Curriculum*. The committee was composed of Bagley, Bonser, Kilpatrick, Rugg, Bobbitt, Charters, Counts, Judd, Coutis, Horn, Kelly and Works, among others. Some of these completed the statement with works of their own. In any case the declaration was an attempt to overcome the antiprogrammatic reaction that had been generated in the new school (Kilpatrick, Rugg, Washburne, Bonner, 1944).

10 Hilda Taba made this statement in the introduction to her book *Developing the curriculum* (1974), recognizing that at that meeting she and Tyler agreed to draft a document to settle the issues that had been opened.

11 His first English edition dates from 1949, its translation into Castilian was a little tardy (1970), but its impact in Latin America is so important that while historians of American education consider Tyler as a specialist in measurement (Cremin). Even as the father of evaluation (Stufflebeam) in Latin America he is an obligatory reference in the field of curriculum.

12 In the case of Mexico it is very interesting to observe this change of behavior in primary-school teachers. The question today is not the teacher/artisan: not *what* and *why* am I going to teach, but *who*

*hat I must teach* (according to the program) and what activities recommended by the teacher's book can I do—an industrial-era change which should be examined at greater length.

13 “This book, says the author, aims to remedy some deficiencies and present a clear and comprehensive sociological analysis that will contribute to understanding the current state of curriculum and social control problems related to it” (Eggleston, 1980, p. 9.)