Walls to be demolished:
A reflection from a critical perspective

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1. Raising the walls up: a technical approach to school

It is overall accepted that the generalisation of the school as a public institution occurred at the time of the Industrial Revolution and, within a certain extent, as an answer to the demands imposed by the new working and social conditions. In fact, the displacement of greatly massive populations from the countryside to the surroundings of industrial towns obliged the state authorities to pay more attention to the problems raised by neglected children and unoccupied adults. It became necessary to “store” and “inbox” them, in order to conform them to the new industrial order. As A. Toffler says, it was necessary to adapt them to a repetitive work in a world full of smoke, noise and machines, a life in overpopulated ambients and collective discipline, where time was supposed to be regulated by the factory whistle instead of the sun cycle (Toffler, 1971). In this particular context, the “mass teaching”, literally inspired by Taylor’s scientific management model (1985. Orig. ed. 1911), should be the right answer for the education of a new type of man the system needed. The idea of gathering crowds of pupils (raw-material) to be processed by teachers (workers) in a central school
So the school we now have - it is not to be forgotten - was born to perform a well determined mission: to simply operate (transform) the pupil with the maximum of efficiency and the minimum of costs, in an entrepreneurial, commercial or industrial logic, stressing the technical rationality of the process-product relationship, aiming at efficiency and productivity (Beyer & Liston, 1996).

Within this context, it is understandable that “teaching” became the central interest for the curriculum design to be applied at schools. Particularly in the USA, and under the influence of Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841), German philosopher and educator, known as the “father of scientific pedagogy”, one assisted, from the middle of 19th century, to the emergence of a new pedagogical area related to the teaching organization, associated to a specific object of study and research: the curriculum. In spite of John Dewey’s works on The absolute curriculum, in 1900, The curriculum in elementary education, in 1901, and The child and the curriculum, in 1902, Franklin Bobbit’s publications (The Curriculum, in 1918, and How to make a curriculum, in 1924) were considered as the great landmarks for the definition of a new area directly concerned with “teaching” and its “scientific management”, according to an ordered and sequential design to reach clear, observable and measurable objectives.

Ralph Tyler later acknowledged these principles, in 1949, with his book Basic principles of curriculum and teaching, in a context of struggling for the supremacy in spatial competition by the two political and military blocks resulting from the 2nd World War. The care with the organization of teaching became more accurate then. This author raised four basic questions, each one focussing on a certain phase of the process of curriculum design:

1. What are the purposes of the school?
2. What educational experiences are related to those purposes?
3. What are the organizational methods, which will be used in relation to those purposes?

4. How will those purposes be evaluated?

Hilda Taba, with her *Curriculum Development – Theory and Practice* published in 1962, made use of the same sort of technical approach, although presenting seven phases for the construction of a coherent and sequential curriculum:

1. The diagnosis of needs;
2. The definition of objectives;
3. The selection of contents;
4. The organization of contents;
5. The selection of learning experiences;
6. The organization of learning experiences;
7. The definition of what is to be assessed and processes and means to do it.

These principles gave form to the so-called *Rationale Tyler* viewed as a linear and prescriptive theory of teaching, based on a quite transparent definition of objectives in terms of observable behaviours, under the presupposition that it was the only way to get an objective evaluation of the results. It was thought that only this way would give the western world the possibility to react to the soviet leadership symbolically conquered with the launching of the first *Sputnik*, in 1957.

Such a behaviouristic idea of curriculum would later be radicalised with Robert Mager’s works, which demanded not only the definition of the external behaviours, but also the definition of the criterion (level of desired quantity or/and quality) and the condition under which they had to be shown. That was the time of the burst of the taxonomies of objectives, as those of Bloom *et al.* (1956), Kratwohl (1964) and Harrow (1972), for example, supporting the well-known “Pedagogy for the Objectives”, which inundated the educational
literature with the illusion of a merely administrative and technical curricular theory turned to
the inside of the school. The teacher was a mere technician of instruction whose role was to
translate general goals and aims determined elsewhere into behavioural concrete objectives to
operate within the classroom. But he didn’t raise questions about what he was supposed to
teach.

2. A political approach demolishing the school walls

In spite of all the hard task of planning strategies, methodologies, techniques and
resources to work at school, as a confined space, I dare to say that it had little to do with the
essence of the curriculum. In fact teacher simply put into practice didactics rules, not having in
mind influences played by other systems from the outside, which strongly interacted with
school. Based on some curriculum critical theories, this paper proposes to demolish the walls
of an apparently safekeeping building. They seem to be quite important to me, as long as they
face knowledge differently, trying to relate it with ideological, cultural and economic forces in
the society in order to deeply understand the reasons lying under the education organization.
With these theories, knowledge stops being considered as something sacred and untouchable,
to become relative and questionable, thus making the school walls fall down.

Having their roots in the critical analysis performed by Frankfurt School, where in the
thirties of 20th century critical thinkers as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm,
Jürgen Habermas, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse were determinant, these theories
started looking at the curriculum worked at school as a result of a certain selection made by
someone who detains power. In their opinion the selection of knowledge (among a broad
universe constituting the curriculum) is, only for that reason, an operation of power. As T. T.
Silva says, while “The traditional theories were theories of acceptance, adjustment and
adaptation. The critical theories are theories of mistrust, questioning and radical change.”
(2000: 27). Making use of J. MacDonald’s terminology (1995), we can say they are the
“framework theories”, which, in opposition to the “curricular engineering theories”, are grounded on the complex relationship between curriculum and ideology, curriculum and culture, and curriculum and power.

For example, Louis Althusser’s essay on *Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d’État*, in 1970, analysed the relationship between culture and economy, in a more subtle way than the one proposed by the traditional Marxism. Using an argumentation founded on the concept of “ideology”, he tried to demonstrate how this “ideology” is stronger than the material power of economic basis for the maintenance of the *status quo*. Also being influenced by Freud and Lacan, he considered that the “ideology” acts in an unconscious way, giving us the feeling that we are responsible and freely choose to believe what we believe. In fact it is a sort of a defence mechanism, which prevents us from facing exploitation, oppression and domination, thus making us alienated from that reality. But even so the “ideology” has a material existence for him. In his opinion, it is a practice with lively and concrete dimensions: it has customs, rituals, patronised behaviours and ways of thinking the State makes use of for the maintenance of dominant classes in power. On the one hand, the control of the State is performed through the repressive forces (courts, police, prisons, army, etc.): the State repressive apparatus. On the other one, there are the so-called State ideological apparatus: political parties, schools, church, family, media and so on. According to this author, these structures give us the impression that we freely choose a set of ideas, which in fact are imposed to us. And the school appears as one of the State ideological apparatus, which assure the reproduction of the already existing relations of power and exploitation among the social classes, on a presupposition of inequity of opportunities, in order to build individuals’ identities in conformity with predetermined cells.
Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron have also studied the role played by the school for the maintenance of the status quo, equally focussing their attention on the culture transmitted by the school. In 1964, with Les Héritiers, les étudiants et la culture, they started to statistically analyse the access to higher education drawing the conclusion that the French university mainly welcomes the “heirs” of social privileges. They also reflected about students and teachers’ attitudes that contribute for the configuration of hidden rules in the university “game”. Rather than economic inequities, they tried to put the role of cultural heritage into evidence, having in mind all that subtle capital made up of knowings (know how to do and how to say), all those that children of upper classes owe to the familiar environment.

With La réplication. Éléments pour une théorie du système d’enseignement, published in 1970, they searched to demonstrate the connection between the school success and the privileged social situations, the same way as the one between the school failure and the poor social contexts. In their opinion, school confirms and reinforces the upper classes culture, disguising a social selection under the form of a technical assumed objectivity. This way, the school legitimates the reproduction of social hierarchies through school hierarchies and the assessment plays a fundamental role in all this process, assuming itself as neutral, scientific and technically rigorous.

In La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement (1979), they tried to demonstrate that “distinction” is not something to be taken for granted (“natural refinement”) but it results from a process of construction. Based on empirical data collected in the sixties, they have considered that taste, for example, in the appreciation of art, food, music, sports or other cultural goods, is an “acquired cultural competence”, used to legitimate social differences.
According to their theses, there are two different systems of social hierarchies in modern societies: the economic one, where each one’s position and power is determined by money and property (economic capital), and the cultural or symbolic one determined by the amount of cultural or symbolic capital a person has: the exterior appearance, honour, prestige, way of being, way of talking, etc. The separation among classes is reproduced by the *habitus*, the social order subjectively interiorised (“symbolic violence”) which makes one internally justify and accept as legitimate ways of cultural expression built by the elite. And the school, in spite of proclaiming its function of democratic instrument of social mobility, legitimates and, at a certain extent, perpetuates chance inequities for its pupils because “all pedagogic action is, objectively, symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power.” (1979: 46).

Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet, as Bourdieu and Passeron’s disciples, also analysed the reproduction of the existing society through schooling process. Characterising this institution as bourgeois and capitalist in *L’école capitaliste en France*, in 1971, they tried to demonstrate how some subject-matters, like History, Geography and Social Studies, are more permeable than others to the dissemination of certain attitudes among the pupils, such as the conformity to roles of submission and subordination, in the case of working classes’ children, at the inverse extent of the promotion of control and leadership roles in the children of the classes owning means of production.

On the other side of the Atlantic, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis have also dedicated themselves to this type of discussion with their *Schooling in capitalist America*, published in 1976. Nevertheless they moved the emphasis from the subject matters the pupils
learn, towards the way they experience the social relations at school, having in mind their adjustment to a structure of a society copied from the economic world. “The correspondence between the social relation of schooling and work accounts for the ability of the educational system to produce an amenable and fragmented labour force. The experience of schooling, and not merely the content of formal learning, is central to this process.” (1976: 125).

Alerting to the dissonances existing between the North American government systems, basically democratic, on the one side, and the economic systems, essentially dictatorial, on the other side (dictatorial, in their opinion, because the workers are not allowed to participate in the decision making), they drew the attention to the role played by the school, saying that it legitimates the myth of a technocratic and meritocratic society, by training the youngsters for social relations of domination and subordination, characteristic of the economic life. Only a deep analysis of what happens at an underground level, the level of hidden curriculum, can reveal in their opinion how certain attitudes are worked, like obedience and respect for the authority, for example, given that they are considered adequate for the maintenance of a social stratified structure.

Another example is Paulo Freire who faced education in general as a political process rather than a pedagogical one. In his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1971) he systematized the foundations of his theory. For him, Man’s ontological vocation is to be a Subject who acts onto the world, having the possibility to change it; the more ignorant he might be, the more deep inside the “silence culture” he might live, he is able to regard the world in a critical way, in a “dialogical” meeting with the other. Since he gets the necessary and adequate instruments for that meeting, the Subject can gradually be acquainted not only with his social and personal
reality, but also with the existing contradictions. This process of becoming aware ("conscientisation") aims at providing the oppressed the necessary instruments of reading and writing for their own liberation.

Education is, from this point of view, a cultural action, which has much to do with the process of critical "conscientisation". As a problematising and not banking concept (transmission meaning deposit), education becomes an instrument for political organisation of subordinated social classes, that is to say, of the oppressed ones. Defining consciousness with the adjective “critical”, he allocates it into a stadium that is beyond the spontaneous sphere of perception of the reality. The consciousness becomes critical when Man assumes a truly epistemological attitude of searching knowledge, fully immersed in the phenomenological essence of the object he wishes to analyse.

In the seventies as well, there came in England a movement which would be known as the “New Sociology of Education” (NSE), led by Michael Young, who in 1971 published a book with the significant title of *Knowledge and Control: New Directions in the Sociology of Education*, made up of chapters written by himself and others like P. Bourdieu, B. Bernstein, G. Esland and N. Keddie, for example. As suggested by the title, the fact of also raising questions about the nature of the knowledge transmitted by the school, this movement confronted the sociological approach used until then, which searched schooling failure reasons in the so-called home circumstances, like home culture, language and environment. Instead of that, the NSE turned its focus of attention into the curriculum itself, making it responsible for the production of social inequities.
Having Lyotard’s post-modernism and Foucault, Derrida and Barthes’s post-structuralism as theoretical references, this movement considered that the idea of Subject liberation through an educational transforming project presupposes a “great narrative” or meta-narrative on education (an ideal vision about education). For the post-modern and post-structuralist criticism, this type of explanation might be dangerous and totalitarian, due to the disastrous consequences one might draw from it: in the political area, it legitimated the totalitarian regimes, and in education, the exclusion of cultural differences.

Based on a similar argument, the NSE rejected the “great narratives” of school curriculum knowledge, trying to study the reasons why certain knowledges are selected and the process they pass through until they become school subject matters. According to this point of view, the curriculum sociology would study the relations of power existing among the various subject matters and areas of knowledge: Why should some have more prestige than others? Why should some have more time allocated in the schedule than others? Why should some be object of formal assessment and not others? Which class interests, professional and institutional ones, would be involved in this power game?

While these critical positions regarding the school and the curriculum were discussed within areas coming from sociology and philosophy, another movement, rejecting Tyler’s curriculum engineering, started appearing in the USA and in Canada, with names as James MacDonald, Dwayne Huebner, Maxine Greene, Michael Apple, Henry Giroux and others under the leadership of William Pinar. Trying to understand the “essence” of education and refusing the curriculum concept as a technique, this movement at a beginning stage gave a greater emphasis to the creativity, arts and humanities, spiritual and aesthetic values, those
aspects connected with a perspective of personal and inter-subjective nature rather than political one, based on phenomenological, hermeneutical, psychoanalytical and autobiographical theories.

In fact the so-called movement of curriculum reconceptualization appeared in a more systematized way, from the I Conference on Curriculum, which took place in the University of Rochester in New York, in 1973. The conference book organised by William Pinar was significantly called *Curriculum Theorizing: The Reconceptualists*, later published under the title of *Curriculum Studies: The Reconceptualization*. It was the first time that from the inside of the curriculum area some voices came to demolish the walls of a school faced as a place for technical and administrative teaching activity. From this movement of reconceptualization however, two authors left the phenomenological and hermeneutical analysis behind to primarily focus onto the political side of the curriculum and school knowledge: Michael Apple and Henry Giroux.

Reacting against the overvalue conferred to the language in the construction of meanings, Michael Apple says it is important not to forget that the world inside and outside school is not only a text. In spite of accepting the worthy elements post-modernity brought to the analysis of education, he alerts to the eventual dangers of exaggerating their use in the data interpretation. The idea is not to substitute a great narrative by another one after all. Works like *Ideology and Curriculum* (1979), *Education and Power* (1985), *Teachers and Texts* (1988), *Official Knowledge* (1993), *Democratic Schools* (1995) and *Cultural Politics and Education* (1996), are some of the books from where it is possible to read his concern for a more fair and democratic education. Being openly against the neo-liberal perspective,
which thinks the world as a vast supermarket, reducing democracy to the “consumer’s free choice” in a free market, M. Apple and J. A. Beane alert for the fact that “the ideals of education, whether men are taught to teach or to plough, to weave or to write, must not be allowed to sink into sordid utilitarianism. Education must keep broad ideals before it and never forget that it is dealing with souls and not with dollars” (1995: 21).

Referring to the social and economic control developed by schools, through simple routines at the level of the hidden curriculum, Apple underlines the idea that schools also control knowledge. “Since they preserve and distribute what is perceived to be ‘legitimate knowledge’ – the knowledge that ‘we all must have’. Schools confer cultural legitimacy on the knowledge of specific groups. But this is not all, for the ability of a group to make its knowledge into ‘knowledge for all’ is related to that group’s power in the larger political and economic arena. Power and culture, then, need to be seen, not as static entities with no connection to each other, but as attributes of existing economic relations in society.” (1990: 63-64). But there is a hope for change when he says that “schools are not ‘merely’ reproduction institutions, where all the knowledge administered, either explicit or hidden, inexorably transforms students in passive and conformed beings, anxious to integrate themselves in an unequal society. (…The students do not) passively internalize pre-designed social messages.” (2001: 55). It is interesting to notice A. Gramsci’s idea of “resistance” (1971) being contrary to the previous fatalist and inexorably reproducing theories firstly described.

Henry Giroux is another example of a broader and critical view upon the school, strongly supporting the permeability of different social trends into school. The son of French
Canadian working class immigrants, he early cared about the issues of ethnic, linguistic, economic and cultural diversity characteristic of public schools nowadays and particularly of North-American society. Inspired in the British cultural studies of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, Henry Giroux’s cultural studies have to be interpreted at the light of a post-modern debate. He criticises the modernist nature of public schooling because within the discourse of modernism, knowledge is drawn almost exclusively from a classic European model of culture and civilisation, fragmented into autonomous and specialized bodies. The “cultural studies” alerts teachers to the issues of multiculturalism, race, gender, identity, power, knowledge, ethics and work, making them think about the ultimate goals of schooling.

From the various books and articles published alone or in co-authorship with S. Aronowitz, A. Penna, W. Pinar, R. Simon, P. McLaren and others, it is possible to draw the recurrent idea of a new post-modern culture, characterized by specificity, difference, plurality and multiple narratives, that are almost entirely ignored by the schools. He gives a special attention to the so-called popular culture which is neglected by the school by wrongly considering it as vulgar and with no social prestige, and consequently unworthy of being academically legitimate. All his works aim at making teachers become aware that their pupils carry with them diverse social memories from the outside of school, which are legitimate too. So the pupils have the right to express and represent them in their process of learning and self-determination.

3. Conclusion
To conclude, it seems obvious that the study and discussion of critical theories like the ones I have been presenting (it does not mean that others could not be selected) provide good instruments for a deep comprehension of what really occurs at school. Their inclusion in teacher education programmes is supposed to train future teachers to be reflexive and critical practitioners (Schön, 1987; Zeichner, 1993), that is to say, real professionals and not mere puppets on a string pulled by anonym forces located somewhere out of their control. If we think about the demands of quality in terms of knowledge and practice formulated by Europe (see the “White Paper on Education and Training – Teaching and Learning – Towards the Learning Society”, 1995), then we have to recognise it is urgent to educate teachers for critical thinking, instead of mechanical and repetitive skills.

In a school we all want democratic and without walls, open to social and cultural diversity that characterises Europe today, we should start “reading” the curriculum no longer as a merely technical, non-theoretical and non-political subject-matter with the only task of organizing the school self-centred knowledge. The school curriculum is a political artefact, which is in interaction with ideology, social structure, culture and power. That is the reason why I consider it is important teachers nowadays are able to understand schools beyond their walls.

References


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