



# European Conference on Curriculum Studies

## Future Directions: Uncertainty and Possibility

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University of Minho  
Institute of Education  
Research Centre in Education (CIEd)

## EDITORS

## ORGANIZATION

## INTRODUCTION

## COMMITTEES

## SPONSORS

### THEME 1

CURRICULUM AND  
SUPRANATIONAL POLICIES

### THEME 2

CURRICULUM AND  
ACCOUNTABILITY

### THEME 3

HIGHER EDUCATION -  
CURRICULAR CHALLENGES

### THEME 4

CURRICULAR PRACTICES  
AND DISCOURSES

### THEME 5

CURRICULUM STUDIES  
- THEORETICAL AND  
METHODOLOGICAL  
PERSPECTIVES

### THEME 6

CURRICULUM - IN BETWEEN  
THE SOCIAL AND THE  
PERSONAL

### THEME 7

CURRICULUM,  
INTERNATIONALIZATION AND  
COSMOPOLITANISM

### SYMPOSIUM 1

CRITIQUE AND REFLECTION  
OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN  
EDUCATION

### SYMPOSIUM 2

STUDENT TEACHERS NEED  
MORE THAN EVIDENCE -  
ARGUMENTS FOR THE PLACE  
OF THEORY IN THE TEACHER  
EDUCATION CURRICULUM

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## The ethnography of education as a new path for curriculum studies

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### Abstract

This paper aims at reflecting on the ethnography of education as a methodology of curriculum research, taking into account the evolution of the theoretical perspectives of curriculum, which are now far away from the simplistic and supposedly scientific vision embodied in the didactics as "science" of teaching, which characterized the early years of this field.

In fact, if the critical and post-critical curriculum analysis had the power to alert us to another (underground) world, where power relations play an important role, a consequently conscious curriculum practice does require an ethnographic attitude, without preconceptions, thus allowing us to understand the social, cultural, historical, political and anthropological reality of the subjects involved in schooling, from their own standpoint. This ethnography will allow us to get access to a whole set of "non-sacred knowledge" of common people that populate the school without being considered minor or illegitimate, for the construction of their identities.

This demands from the curriculum researcher an immersion in the field, in order to apprehend the other's culture as if he were a real native. One thing is to face the curriculum as a political and pedagogical proposal at the level of intentions, thus involving a macro analysis of educational policy; another thing is to look at the curriculum, in a micro approach, entering deep inside the world of the learners, while phenomenological subjects, with their own histories, own backgrounds and own cultural references, that is to say, to look at the curriculum as a practice of social construction of identities

It is at this point of micro curricular approach that, in my opinion, the ethnography of education could be a great help for curriculum research.

Keywords: curriculum studies; ethnography of education; teacher's professionalism.

### Introduction

Since the creation of the Research Centre in Education at the University of Madeira, in 2003, the ethnography of education has been faced as an overarching research line, with great probability of being present in the other three fundamental lines of the Center, each one ruling its own post-graduate programs: Curriculum, Pedagogical Innovation and Leadership and Educational Administration.

Thinking about education as a social, cultural, historical, political and anthropological reality, we were already aware at that time of the fact that a real understanding of what is going on in education demands an almost complete immersion in the field. Probably due to the francophone worldview acquired from a PhD done at the University of Caen in 1995, when the phenomenology, the researcher's implication, the social representations and the paradigm of the complexity were object of intensive debates, my affiliation both to Alain Coulon and his ethnomethodology, and to Georges Lapassade and Patrick Boumard and their ethnography of education occurred as a natural process. In fact, soon after my thesis defence, I participated in the creation of an embryo of the Société Européenne de l'Ethnographie de l'Éducation in Paris in December 1997, with the presence of Lapassade, who became its Honorary President, at the 1st SEEE Meeting in Lecce, Italy, until he died in 2008.

On the other hand, the Anglo-Saxon methodological approaches were originally brought to the CIE-UMa by Carlos Nogueira Fino. He let us know namely American authors like James Spradley, Michael Genzuk, Martyn Hammersley, and others who had inspired him in his PhD defended at the University of Lisbon.

The enlargement of this field, by sharing these two views, was further enhanced by the contribution of others as Peter Woods and Bob Jeffrey, from the UK, Fernando Sabirón Sierra, from Spain, Roberto Sidnei Macedo with his Ethno-



research, from Brazil, and some others working in this area for so many years in Latin America, as Justa Ezpeleta, Elsie Rockwell and others more.

As I am currently leading the research line of Curriculum, with a Masters in Pedagogical Supervision and a PhD in Curriculum, I have been confronted with methodological doubts and concerns raised by our young researchers at the time of designing the research project (usually at the beginning of the second year of one or other program). And the ethnographic approach has emerged, with increasing incidence, as a methodological option for our students who are either educators or teachers. Why does this happen? Is it because it is in fashion? Or is it due to its relevance in the field of educational research? Why is it necessary a permanent dialogue between the scientific area of Curriculum and the Ethnography of Education?

In order to answer these questions I organized this paper in three parts. Facing it as a three-act play I structured the paper in three acts. In Act I the protagonist is the Curriculum. In Act II the main character (the Curriculum) encounters what may be considered an obstacle or a facilitator: the Ethnography of Education. Finally in Act III the climax occurs with the equilibrium resettled through the marriage of Curriculum and the Ethnography of Education.

## Act I: Curriculum

Curriculum exists since man imagined an institution of education, be it a university, a (Jesuits) college, or a school. It was necessary to choose which subject-matters to teach in formal education: *trivium* and *quadrivium*, letters and science, mother tongue and foreign language, biology, physics and chemistry, history and geography, in short, a syllabus consisting of knowledge to teach. For centuries, the curriculum was seen as an organized repository of contents (subjects, topics) to be forwarded to younger generations. At the romantic transition of 19th to 20th century, under the auspices of the New School movement, what mattered was the way of learning, that is to say, the methods, and not the subjects themselves. Later the objectives and the evaluation were the two other elements necessary to configure the technological model (the Rationale Tyler) which characterized the industrial public school.

If the universal access to education began to be faced as a way of liberation of the individual from the darkness of ignorance in which he was sunk (Age of Reason and Enlightenment, *Aufklärung*), homogeneous mass schooling quickly revealed itself as a very powerful means of minds' domestication, discipline of attitudes and behaviors (such as punctuality, for example, whatever the weather, sun shining or rain, which was not so easy to be accepted by those who were used to working in the fields according to seasonal and weather conditions). These attitudes were necessary to greater productivity in factories: a maximum efficacy with higher profit margins, and a minimum of time and cost. The technical rationality that pervaded the labor world, in the context of the Industrial Revolution, would early arrive at school, with a special focus in the so-called means-ends relation.

It is at this stage that the curriculum began to assert itself as an area of study and research, caring about the best arrangement of didactic-pedagogical devices to achieve the predetermined aims, goals and objectives, carefully divided into specific and behavioral objectives assuming that the whole would be achieved by the sum of the parts.

The Curriculum was then mistaken with Didactics, in conformity with a simplistic and a cause-effect deterministic paradigm. Taking care of the cause (teaching) the effect (learning) would appear. A "good" educational organization, named as curriculum-as-plan by Aoki (1986), with clear and measurable objectives and well-defined steps should produce the same effects in learners, whenever or wherever they were. This idea of timelessness and universality of the rules of good teaching was associated to mass schooling, aiming at the homogenization. The curriculum was supposed to expand "from the center to the periphery". The "center" idealized what had to be accomplished by the "periphery". And the teacher as part of the "periphery" was the implementer of the guidelines issued by the "center". So he had to be a good educational technician, but just that, a technician. Many of us were trained for these technical functions, and many of us with supervision responsibilities educated teachers to be "good" technicians.

In the late sixties of the twentieth century, however, educational theories with roots in the Frankfurt School (thirties of the same century) began to question the curriculum neutrality, establishing the link between school knowledge and the interests of a particular social class. Since Althusser, who viewed school as a "State Ideological Apparatus", several sociologists started facing the school differently. Bourdieu and Passeron discussed the "reproduction" through mechanisms of "symbolic violence" and "double symbolic violence". They went on characterizing "the Heirs" or explaining later what "Distinction" meant. These social studies were pursued by their disciples Baudelot and Establet



in their *“L'École capitaliste en France”* and, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, Bowles and Gintis with their *“Schooling in capitalist America”*. These are examples of intellectuals, philosophers and sociologists who wanted to understand school and its organization at a non-explicit level, but on a much deeper one.

Therefore the “hidden curriculum” became the preferred object of research, facing the school as a political arena where opposing forces fight each other: on the one side, a ruling class, with an elitist and hegemonic culture supported by legislative and bureaucratic procedures, programs, textbooks, tests and examinations, and on the other side, an oppressed class with a popular culture deemed illegitimate to be passed to the younger generations by the school.

But it is under the aegis of a new sociology of education in England (NSE), with Michael Young leading it, that it started, within the area of curriculum itself, a broader movement named as the Curriculum Reconceptualization in which curriculumists as William Pinar, James Huebner, Basil Bernstein, Michael Apple, Ivor Goodson, Henry Giroux, Tomaz Tadeu da Silva, José Augusto Pacheco and others more contest the neutrality of the curriculum that the technological models tried to convey earlier. From the point of view of these authors, the curriculum is impregnated with a very strong political-ideological component, aiming to perpetuate the social and political system, based on the assumption of the curriculum neutrality.

This curriculum theory raises questions about the legitimacy of the selection of knowledge, relating it to a matter of power. In other words, who has the power to say what is socially relevant to teach at school? Who decides that? From what social class are those who make the decisions? How far from their kind of language, culture and knowledge, are the students of popular classes? What is the main purpose of the curriculum: to blur or further accentuate social differences? Is it to blame some students for their inability to achieve the level of their colleagues?

Now, this theory argues that the curriculum should reflect the diverse social and cultural worldviews co-existing in the same school setting. Thus it is necessary the involvement of all the social actors, without exceptions: teachers, students, parents ... The “cultural capital” is crucial now obliging curriculum to be read in connection with culture. In this new perspective, curriculum is seen as a social practice in construction, and has to be aware of the cultural diversity that the mass and compulsory school nowadays hosts.

Contrarily to the fatalistic pessimism of the early statistical sociology, now there emerges an idea of “resistance” from the side of the “oppressed” classes, animated by the so-called pedagogy of possibility, or pedagogy of hope, in Paulo Freire’s words. It is no longer possible to remain indifferent to the social, economic, ethnic and religious diversity of today’s mass school, increasingly marked by the phenomena of mobility, characteristic of the current era of globalization, such as migration, tourism, international partnerships and exchanges.

Now the curriculum begins to be seen not so naive, but as the core of the institutionalized process of education in which power relations intersect in view of the formation of social identities.

One thing is to face the curriculum as a political and pedagogical proposal at the level of intentions, thus involving a macro analysis of educational policy (through legislation, politicians’ speeches and their implementation) decided by those in power; another thing is to look at the curriculum, in a micro approach, entering deep inside the world of the learners, as phenomenological subjects, with their own histories, own backgrounds and own cultural references, that is to say, to look at the curriculum as a real practice of social construction of identities.

## Act II: Ethnography of Education

In the new perspective presented above, curriculum is no longer unique, centralizing, standardizing and homogenizing. When the Decree-law 98-A/92 sustained the idea of development of specific and/or alternative study programs, later clarified by Order No. 178-A/ME/93 of July 30, it opened the doors for the construction of the curriculum by teachers in schools. This trend culminated with the publication of the famous Decree-Laws 6/2001 and 7/2001, the former republished through the Decree-Law 18/2011. Despite many attempts against the school autonomy we have been used to since then, the School Curriculum Project and the Class Curriculum Project are already part of the daily lives of teachers, forcing them to get closer to the real world of their learners. These are no longer numeric abstractions, or mere objects of learning, but subjects leading their own learning. They are phenomenological subjects, carrying their diverse cultural references that should be replicated in the curriculum.

It is at this point of micro approach, focused on the construction of social identities that the Ethnography of Education interacts with the Curriculum.



When I said, in 2003, in the *European Journal of Ethnography of Education*, that "a curriculum politically aware and open to cultural diversity requires an ethnographically attentive teacher" (p. 120), I meant (and I am still convinced) that the teacher should be a researcher who takes the initiative of curriculum construction, having a solid foundation of knowledge of the environment in which he acts. And how can he come close to it, except for the ethnography?

If we etymologically analyze the word "ethnography", we split it into *ethnos* (group of people) + *graphein* (writing), ie, writing about a group of people. The ethnography first appeared as a technique used in anthropology and later in cultural anthropology.

Trying to frame it a little better, we know that both sociology and anthropology emerged as academic disciplines in the nineteenth century, both marked by the same paradigm of modernity (western modernity), although each one facing its own specific social object: the modern society, in the case of sociology, and the pre-modern one, in the case of anthropology.

Raewyn Connell (2007) affirms that the project of sociology aimed at legitimizing the imperialism through narratives that justified global domination in terms of subject-matters by white male and Euro-American subjects, while anthropology, coming after the Christian missionaries, played the role of the maid (servant) of the imperialism, because the anthropologists wished to report the lives and customs of the primitive Other, "the alter ego the West constructed for itself" (Trouillot, 1991: 28), constructed from a self-centered - ethnocentric - reference, from the point of view of the scholar, the civilized sage confronted with primitive tribes.

Divided between the physical or biological anthropology, on the one hand, and the social anthropology, on the other, the former studied the fossil or present man in his anatomical physiological and racial characteristics, relating them to his evolution, influenced by Darwin, or his geographical location, while the latter, the social anthropology aimed at studying the rules of social behavior, techniques, practices and customs of a particular social group. In these analyses a biological determinism was present, according to which cultural differences were considered as the result of biological differences among men, reinforcing the colonial and imperialist thesis predominant at that time.

However Franz Boas (1858-1942) broke this evolutionary vision which considered the cultures of non-Caucasian people as inferior, arguing that every culture, regardless its geographic space has a particular story to be discovered. For this it is important to rebuild this story with the terms used by that particular culture. Thus, to systematize the knowledge about it, it is necessary to grasp it as a whole, through long stays on the field, and with the use of the ethnography. In fact, Boas adapted himself to the living conditions of the Inuit people: he learned their language and tried to participate in all their activities.

Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), as well, studied the lives of the natives in the Mailu Islands in 1914. Instead of just observing (direct observation), as other researchers of his time did, he rather used the ethnography, recording on a table he invented all the data he collected from his daily coexistence with the natives, all over the six months he spent on the field, in order to better understand the reasons behind the Kula exchanges. In the Preface to his book "Argonauts of the Western Pacific", referring his stay in the Trobriands Islands, James Frazer says that Malinowski operated the major shift in anthropology because, more than describing, he wanted to really understand the human behavior. Caught by World War I, as he was Polish, he remained there almost an entire year (from July 1915 to May 1916). In 1917 he returned to these islands again.

From this chance event, came the notion that fieldwork should be characterized by a prolonged stay on the field, in order to provide a comprehensive reading of the community observed, from a thoroughly detailed description. Criticizing the previous generation of anthropologists, Malinowski introduced the notion of participant observation, according to the idea that the anthropologist should live with the population in favor of his study, engaging himself in their activities to get as much information as possible. About the "proper conditions for ethnographic work", he wrote: "These, as said, consist mainly in cutting oneself off from the company of other white men, and remaining in as close contact with the natives as possible, which really can only be achieved by camping right in their villages" (p. 6). In this method of information gathering, field diary (*journal de bord* or field notes) plays a very important role.

Clifford James Geertz (1926-2006) is also considered a pioneer of the new anthropology, with fieldwork conducted in Indonesia and Morocco. Having started his studies on religion in Java Island, early found that it was not possible to analyze one aspect, in this case, religion, without being in conjunction with everything else. Geertz proposed a reading of societies as if they were texts, open to interpretation: Hermeneutic or Interpretative Anthropology. The society (the text), full of meaning, is written by the anthropologist, so it is his essay, to be interpreted by those who have not gone through the experiences described. The ethnography is therefore a "thick description" in order to provide others the possibility of a hermeneutic reading.



For Marcel Mauss (1872-1950), the scholar of the "*potlatch*", there are not civilized and uncivilized people, but people of different civilizations (how different groups of people think and do things differently). He also thinks the aim of the research is not to study fragments each independent from the other, but to build a coherent whole of the observed society.

With these studies, the anthropology epistemologically breaks the positivist paradigm that rejected subjectivity and advocated neutrality and distance between the observer and the observed. We are not seeing Malinowski studying the tribe of the Trobriands Islands in the Pacific, with all the academic mannerisms he had when participating in a scientific debate... Neither do we with Margaret Mead interviewing the 68 young women from Samoa about casual sex... Neither with the Tunisian Jeanne Favret Saada when she studied witchcraft and sorcery in Normandy...

The question is, how can we accede to the true meaning of something spoken or performed by members of a community, if we do not share the same meaning, ie, if we are not part of that community? Or from the point of view of the subject observed, will I be able to be so transparent and true before someone who is alien to me? Or will I prefer, instead, to hide myself behind a mask I put on according to each situation?

Anthropology, or better said, cultural anthropology and, through this way, ethnography, show us that to really understand a culture, it has to be described and interpreted as if I were a native of that same culture. It is not enough to look like a native, but I need to be a native, or at least, I need to become a native. For this, I have to allow myself to be converted, to hope they will adopt me. I only know a given social reality in-depth if I am an insider.

As Patrick Boumard (1989) refers in his work "*Les savants de l'intérieur*", "*le savant extérieur, privé par définition de cette 'compétence sociale', n'a pas accès au sens contextualisé, quels que soient son savoir et même éventuellement sa bonne volonté*" (p. 107). Or as Georges Lapassade (1991) says, "*Un signe ne devient signifiant que dans la mesure où deux acteurs lui accordent une même signification*" (p. 19). Meaning is not something "in my head", but something shared.

Now schools and classes can also be thought of as communities to be studied in this same way. Willard W. Waller (1899-1945), in the twenties of last century, in Chicago, was one of the first studying daily life at school, having published his *Sociology of Teaching* in 1932. But he did not only analyze the social interactions developed there, but also the multiple ties that the school as a social institution creates with the community around it. This was done using techniques such as life stories, newspapers, field diaries, case studies, personal letters and various documents. He managed to prove that the school has its own culture.

Schools (and who says schools, says classes) are cultural communities. Through the interaction among its members, they also set, like the tribes in a symbolic way, rules of social coexistence, beliefs and values, hierarchies and customs. These environments are socially constructed. And their participants struggle for the construction of their own identities. Is it possible, or at least ethical, for the curriculum to ignore and neglect this reality?

*"L'école est le siège de rituels complexes qui régissent les relations personnelles. Il y a des jeux, des équipes, des 'guerres sublimés', un code moral, un ensemble de cérémonies, des traditions, des lois"* (Coulon, 1990: 68-69). And the curriculum aims, ultimately, at the construction of social identities.

That is why I consider the curriculum has to take into account the entire stock of "secular knowledge" of vulgar subjects who populate the school world, because this knowledge is no longer illegitimate for the construction of social identities.

### Act III: Teacher's professionalism

It is at the crossroad between the Curriculum and the Ethnography of Education that I see the teacher assuming, as a researcher, their teaching professionalism. Within the autonomy granted, or better said, conquered by the teachers now, their curriculum decisions cannot be unjustified. They should be based on research, applied research, grounded on his working field which is authentic, natural and not forged for an academic purpose.

As an ethnographer, the teacher should not deny his subjectivity, but rather take advantage of his self-knowledge, to enter the world of the "other." He has to question his own identity: Who am I? Why am I here? What does this class mean to me? What has this to do with my expectations and aspirations, when I chose my course? What was I like when I was a student? Jean-Louis Le Grand refers to this exercise as a self-maieutic implication, or a reflection on the involvement of the researcher in the subject of research, in order to get free from his prejudices. More than a classic



introspective self-analysis of someone alone and far from the world, "*l'auto-maieutique implicationnelle, par ses enracinements multiples, contribue à une déconstruction de ce qui serait une identité pour saisir comment le 'soi' est habité de manière complexe et opaque par une multitude de néo-identités hétérogènes*" (le Grand, 1992: 68).

As an ethnographer, the teacher is devoted to relate to the "other", trying to understand what the "other" thinks, not from his own references but from the "other"'s references. Students, classes and schools are living communities attributing meanings through social interaction. So he has to capture them in order to make them part of the very curriculum of that particular school, or particular class, since the community observed is not a sample and the meanings are not generalizable either.

As an ethnographer, the teacher cannot go to the field with hypotheses previously designed, based on his own references. He must understand the structure and essence of the experiences of "a" group of people, his students, his colleagues, but from the point of view of "the" group. For this he has to ignore his own prejudices and describe the "deep structure" of the phenomena to reach the group's symbolic meanings.

As an ethnographer, the teacher should collect multiple and varied data, allowing their triangulation: from observation records, to the interviews, artifacts, documents, strictly following basic ethical procedures. He may simply start with a blank notepad and record everything that is going on.

As an ethnographer, the teacher has to explain how the categories of analysis were constructed to give meaning to the data, using extracts of dialogues, narratives that at some point will cross with his own narrative thus emerging a text that gives a better understanding of the group interactions. Long stays on the field are the academic years the teacher spends in his school.

Then we can say that the teacher participates, with professionalism, as a real "cultural producer" (Giroux, 1994), in the social construction of identities of his students, in the respect of their history and their culture.

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## THEME 5

CURRICULUM STUDIES - THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Young, M. (Ed.) (1971). *Knowledge and Control: New Directions in the Sociology of Education*. London: Collier-Macmillan.