

Maintaining knowledge on curriculum conversation, but through discourse: A dialogue with Gert Biesta¹

Mantendo o conhecimento na conversação curricular, porém via discurso: um diálogo com Gert Biesta

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Abstract

I present in this paper my dialogue with Gert Biesta about the connections among knowledge, power, curriculum and discourse. I argue that my way of thinking is not a kind of relativism. The absence of a criterion that once and for all justifies a decision making among different possible solutions to a problem - different curriculum options, as well as different ways to educate - is not a reason for the decisions not to be made. I agree with Derrida and Laclau that such decisions are taken in an undecidable terrain.

Keywords: Knowledge. Curriculum. Pragmatism.

Resumo

Apresento neste artigo meu diálogo com Gert Biesta sobre as conexões entre conhecimento, poder, currículo e discurso. Defendo que esta forma de pensar não é relativista. A ausência de critérios que finalmente justifiquem de uma vez por todas uma decisão realizada entre diferentes possibilidades de solução para um problema - diferentes opções curriculares, assim como diferentes formas de educar - não é uma razão para que decisões não sejam realizadas. Concordo com Derrida e Laclau que tais decisões são tomadas em um terreno indecível.

Palavras-chave: Conhecimento. Currículo. Pragmatismo.

After reading Gert Biesta's paper, I felt the same way as I did with his other texts. The consistency and originality of his arguments, textual cohesion and

coherence enable the reader to follow his propositions and to learn something new, a different way of thinking about issues that appear to be well

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established. I do not highlight only in order to praise the conference, but also to emphasize to any students who may be present here today, how good texts make it possible for us to learn.

Gert brought me back to reflect on Dewey, confirm some impressions about pragmatist thought, to refute others, and above all, to think about reading him again with a focus on other questions. I would like to analyse the Brazilian appropriation of Dewey's thought, especially on the curricular field. I would like to research how a certain academic common sense has been constructed, which restricts a great author to a myriad of stereotypes - I immediately remembered some undergraduate classes. Gert mentions Dewey's position as being a child-centred conception of education - instead of a communication-centered approach - but I can also offer the simple interpretation of his thought as a defense of liberal democracy, as though, having said these words, there would be no need to say anything more about his political conception.

Although the specific discussion regarding the appropriation of Dewey's thought is intriguing, I choose to organize my review focusing on the discussion about knowledge. Gert suggests reasoning with Dewey, and going beyond a dual opposition between objectivism and subjectivism in the curriculum field. He also examines questions about the epistemological relativism.

From the conclusions presented by Gert, my purpose is to discuss the same questions by means of the discursive perspectives with which I work, many of them are in line with Biesta's work (Biesta, 2006; Peters & Biesta, 2009). Therefore, I do not intend to discuss Dewey or what Gert says about Dewey. I intend to leave this topic for another time. I intend to discuss Biesta's conclusions about knowledge and particularly his conclusions about curriculum.

I do not further develop the arguments in most cases. At times, this is because of the lack of time for this purpose, and at others because of certain aspects that I still need to go into more deeply. Sometimes I only ask questions. However, I truly believe that stating an issue is a way to start answering it. We can keep in touch and discuss these ideas.

I also start by repeating something I mentioned in the Seminar with (and about) Stephen Ball at *Unicamp* last Friday. Strategically I am not working on the assumption that comparing these different discursive contributions will produce a synthesis or establish arguments to conclude which perspective needs to be followed. Theories are operators that favor and allow certain interpretations and conclusions, while at the same time blocking others. They also respond to contingencies of the trajectories of each of us as researchers. So I therefore try to reflect on the possibilities offered by different discursive contributions and understand the investigations into the productivity of curriculum policy and curriculum in general.

To conclude this introduction, I would like to point out that, like Gert, I do not consider that the discursive approaches - Derrida, Foucault, and Laclau - imply affiliation to postmodern thought, or that relativism is synonymous with postmodernism. The first interpretations of Michael Young on knowledge were relativist (Young, 1978), and even with this he was classified as postmodern. As I have previously discussed in other texts, by reference to the curriculum field, postmodernism and post-structuralism records are different and respond to different questions (Lopes, 2013). I agree with Biesta that the discursive perspectives are situated in post-structuralism and refer to the passage from an epistemological vision for an ethical-political vision of the world. This change has significant implications for the curriculum, to the extent that much of the discussion in the history of the curriculum is developed, and is sometimes confined to a discussion about school knowledge.

In my research, I seek to highlight the political interpretation of the curriculum, in a different way to that of Biesta's thought, but not one that is incompatible with his argument. That is why I argue in favor of the politicization of the relationship between knowledge and curriculum, but in order to do so, I am trying to construct another way of conceiving the curriculum policy.

I agree with Biesta that we are presently developing a privilege of learning at the expense of

the focus on education - a process that he called *learnification*. In Brazil, this centrality of learning, correlated with the centrality in teaching can be identified not only in curricular proposals for Basic Education (elementary and high school) and in the process of large-scale assessment (Macedo, 2012, 2013), but also in a series of actions for teacher training with curricula focused on specific content.

However, I am somewhat reluctant to interpret this scenario in terms of a partial disappearance of the discussion on knowledge in the curriculum field, as proposed by Biesta, supported by Michael Young. Firstly, Young's own position has contributed to keeping the debate about knowledge in the curriculum field (Young, 2007; Young & Muller, 2007, 2010). Secondly, and most importantly, much of what is discussed in relation to curriculum policy revolves around how to organize the knowledge for teaching.

I feel that the focus on knowledge has been changing. I basically identify two major strands which are more meaningful (and I also stress they are not the only ones). One from which knowledge is inserted within a debate about culture, policy and difference, seeking to more broadly question the epistemological universality of science. This perspective also questions the epistemological objectivism in general, including that which is still present in critical sociological approaches. The second perspective, in an objectivist way, focuses on knowledge as *something* that needs to be taught and learned, without question. It is as if we already knew what everyone needs to learn, especially as regards children and teenagers at school. It is as if there is only interest in understanding how to regulate the selection and organization of this knowledge in order to achieve the intended purposes. These purposes are to construct the identities of students with the provisions, skills and behaviors that are supposed to be desirable.

These discursive modes of operating with knowledge, produce thinking in different ways, as well as curriculum proposals and practices, and thus make curriculum policy. Within policies, the regulatory mechanisms of knowledge are often organized based on competences. Such competences, as a device of

curricular organization, contribute to an apparent invisibility of knowledge, insofar as contextual application of know-how is valued. As in many curricular policies the competences are associated with the regulation of school subjects (Lopes, 2008; Ball *et al.*, 2012), nevertheless, the epistemological questions are reintroduced through the disciplinary device. The school subjects continue to organize the debate on curricular knowledge and challenge us to understand the disciplinarity in other perspectives (Lopes, 2011).

From my point of view, the disappearance of knowledge, to which Biesta refers and supports the primacy of teaching and learning in the curriculum, can be translated as a privilege of the objectivist conceptions regarding knowledge. Objectivism is usually located in the prospects of instrumental curriculum, referenced in tylerian senses, and also with the logic of curriculum planning as a basis of a specific project for society. It is thus referred to as a conservative perspective from a political and social standpoint. Perhaps by reason of sociological perspectives that criticize curriculum planning and its conception of neutral knowledge, epistemological objectivism would seem to have been overcome in the curriculum field.

However even with all of the sociological trends towards the critical perspective of the curriculum, among those developed by Michael Young and Michael Apple, the objectivism leaves its mark on them. In the entanglements among proposals, practices and the curriculum theory, the curriculum policy also succumbs to these senses.

As I have developed in another paper (Lopes, 2012), the sociological perspective assumes that it is possible to set the subject (collective) that makes the selection of knowledge in school. Through this way of thinking, they understand the curriculum as a contested selection of content from a wider culture, also inserted in a logic of conflict by legitimizing the power of symbolic goods. Above all, the sociological perspective presupposes it to be possible to stabilize this selection and the subject (dominant class, social groups with the most power) who selects the

knowledge. The subject who selects and the selected object are both embodied in certain interests and have fixed their identities, in this case, in terms of one essential parameter associated with social class. Therefore, in this way, the concept of culture as a repertoire of disputed symbolic goods maintains objectivist and essentialist senses.

In my opinion, this objectivism is further emphasized in Young's current position, which is in defense of a powerful knowledge - specialized and decontextualized knowledge that empowers whoever holds it (Young, 2007). This argument is supported in a conception of truth, objectivity and social realism against sociological perspectives of social construction of knowledge (Young & Muller, 2007). It is not the place or time to develop Young's ideas or criticize them, starting with the fact that they do not consider the critics of objectivism in the natural sciences, which at times he himself takes as an example in his discussions. I would just like to point out that I agree with Balarin (2008) when she states that Young's analysis introduces a concept of foundational knowledge unable to make room for the particular otherness and difference, as well as the very discussion of power. So in one way, as Biesta does, it can be considered that sociological approaches to the critical perspective relativize knowledge by connecting it to power (I will further analyse relativism), and, on the other hand, when they consider knowledge as a type of data selected from a broader culture to be included in the curriculum (Lopes, 2011; Macedo, 2012), they ultimately objectify, and somehow reify knowledge. In another paper, I have discussed (Matheus & Lopes, 2013) how objectivism favors the current relationship between critical discourses and discourses related to teaching and learning in Brazilian Basic Education.

In other words, I am interested in including in Biesta's debate the idea that the politicization of knowledge, started with sociological approaches, does not hinder the debate about knowledge. This is a rather significant contribution from the critical perspective to this debate: connecting knowledge and power. What seems to be one of the points that complicates

the debate on knowledge and curriculum in this context is the way the objectivity of knowledge is understood and defended.

Such objectivism seems to be maintained by the very necessity of sustaining a teleological approach with regard to the "social" - the utopia of a society without power - reconciled with itself. Persisting with the idea that there is a project to construct this society, it remains the prospect of forming the subject and identifying it with the knowledge that supposedly guarantees that same society.

From my point of view, Biesta's analysis brings an important contribution to questioning the objectivist conceptions of knowledge, and thereby he distances himself from Young and simultaneously, through Dewey's pragmatism, questions the separation between objectivism and subjectivism. They are significant conclusions concerning the debate about knowledge: understanding action as a relationship between experience and knowledge; the vision of knowledge as it concerns conditions (I would say, the contexts) and consequences (I would say, the responsibility and decision); the bonds established between knowledge and action, considering that action changes what is known; the notion of knowledge objects being like constructions that also connect to the subject who constructs them. I think these conclusions contribute to the questioning of empiricist and universalist conceptions about knowledge that are present in the curriculum field.

But perhaps Biesta's most important conclusion is that which refers to knowledge as the opening of possibilities and not closure of pre-established certainties. Or in other words, the dislocation from the debate about what is true to the debate about what problem is to be faced. This position is closer to those of the post-foundational perspectives. As Mouffe (1998, p.14) argues, these perspectives "deny the availability of an Archimedean point - such as reason - that could guarantee the possibility of a mode of argumentation that would have transcended its particular conditions of enunciation". We enunciate problems and we need to make decisions with regard

to these problems. We have to make decisions among positions that refer to a variety of reasons, and there are no grounds for deciding among this plurality, but even in this way we still decide.

Biesta's attempt, through a pragmatic approach, is to argue against the pirandellian relativism of *Right you are (if you think you are)*, or as Biesta prefers to put it, *I say tomato, you say tomato*. For Biesta this relativism would be tied to the social construction of knowledge and to the connection between knowledge and power. These conceptions were originally developed by the sociological perspective of curriculum as outlined by Young. Because of this, I understood Biesta's text as a pragmatic alternative to Young's foundationalism.

At this point, I follow a direction that differs from the one proposed by Biesta. Firstly, because I agree with Laclau and Mouffe (1987) that the pirandellian relativism is an invention of foundationalists such as Young: nobody defends such a position that belief in any subject is as good as any other. For Laclau and Mouffe, the difference lies between those who claim there is a being of objects (ontic level) on which to rely, by direct experience, and those who assert that there is not a being (an essence) of the objects, but only a contextual existence (ontological dimension) to be understood in a mediated form. The central issue is to discuss how this mediation is constructed. In the case of Laclau, Mouffe, Derrida and others who rely on post-structural records, such mediation is always discursive - and with this I am particularly in agreement and as far as I know, Biesta also follows the same way of thinking. Meaning is put into the world through language, but that does not make discourse confined to language: discourse is practical, an action that is signified by language.

Secondly, my way of thinking differs from that of the approach of relativism, because, from my point of view, the absence of a criterion that once and for all justifies a decision making among different possible solutions to a problem - different curriculum options, as well as different ways to educate - is not a reason for the decisions not to be made. I tend to agree with

Derrida and Laclau that such decisions are taken in an undecidable terrain.

Therefore, I prefer Laclau's solution (2011). He subverts both the transcendental subjectivism as well as the objectivism essentialist by analysing the relationships between the particular and universal. So instead of oscillating between multiple truths that are based on the particularity of the differences and the only truth that relies on a universal ground (this ground can be the scientific knowledge, or the ontological privilege of a social class or any other ground), it is possible to operate with the universal ground, as one particular ground that at some point becomes universal. The decision about which particular occupies the empty space of the universal, provisionally and contingently, is a matter of power and discourse.

I present these ideas even though they deserve a much greater development than is possible here, because the issues that they entail cast little doubt on the possibilities of pragmatic decision and transaction. On one hand, Biesta's conclusions seem very powerful, insofar as they indicate non-foundational solutions, since the consequences and contexts, and therefore, the action comprise the space in which to decide among the multiple possibilities generated by knowledge. On the other hand, I consider that a theory of conflict can expand possibilities in the pragmatic decision approach.

Any action to validate implies conflict: how can we think about conflicts among the possible solutions to contextual problems? If reality is modified by the action (or is discursively constructed, as I prefer to say), how can we, by action, solve the choice among different possibilities? How can we decide between Creationism and Darwinism? I agree that the solution should be given considering which problems are concerned and that these problems are contextually located. Furthermore, no solution can be compulsorily implemented in an analogous situation.

In turn, I understand that such position does not allow us to escape the power and policies. It is rather to the contrary: the more we put the question in terms of a problem and not about a truth, the more

we are under a lack of grounds, the more we have a plurality of possibilities for action in a conflict. There will be no suspension of conflicts and antagonisms, if a given option was to be contextually (and here perhaps I should say contingently) chosen. The question that remains is how to deal with conflicts and antagonisms. I consider that the only conclusion is political: the only possible solution to this conflict is political.

In the absence of grounds, we can operate with quasi-contingent and provisional grounds, to increase opportunities for meaningful democratic struggle. We can take the responsibility for the decisions we make, secured by acts of power. Perhaps a way out is to always express that there is no absolute reason justifying our choices, we can only extend to political action that multiple rationalities compete with the possibility of signifying the world.

From my point of view the curriculum is a space where we can continue to dispute. The curriculum policies, as a fight for meaning of what curriculum is, give us an opportunity to expand the possibilities of signification of the world. Texts written by Biesta have shaken certain sedimented certainties and at the same time opened up political possibilities. Thus, I can only thank you very much for your contributions to this discussion.

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