

# Editorial introduction

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This book is based on the International Seminar “Curriculum Autonomy Policies in Europe: Trends, Tensions & Transformations”, which was held at Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, on January 25 and 26, 2019. Besides including a set of papers that were presented in that context, this publication includes texts from other relevant authors who have conducted research on the topic under discussion – curriculum autonomy. This topic has received attention from many researchers, with different theoretical perspectives.

In the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which were marked by the predominance of a technical perspective, the conceptualization of curriculum autonomy tended to be limited to the idea of adapting the means to the ends, the latter being usually regarded as instrumental to the satisfaction of societal needs. But by the end of the 1960s, when the first wave of re-conceptualization changed Curriculum Studies, such relation between means and ends was questioned, and the idea that curriculum autonomy may also entail the ends became increasingly accepted. Later on, the consolidation of Critical Theory strengthened this tendency, by contesting the assumption that the ultimate aim of curriculum construction should be to fulfill the needs of society, by uncovering relations between curriculum and interests pursued by different sectors of society, and by legitimating emancipatory ways of dealing with the curriculum. Post-critical approaches also reject a conceptualization of curriculum autonomy as permission to perform technical procedures in adapting curricula whose aims are taken for granted. The concept of curriculum autonomy is not even central in the latter approaches, which emphasize that changing the curriculum requires understanding it from multiple perspectives, which emerge from different identities, related to gender, race, sexual orientation, and other factors. Accordingly, for Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman (1995), curriculum change depends on issues of identity and power.

We want change. However, many degrees of complexity have entered our conceptions of what it means to do curriculum work, to be a curriculum specialist, to work for curriculum change. In general, we are no longer technicians, that is, people who accept unquestioningly others' priorities (p. 6).

This radical view of change challenges researchers to think about autonomy at a crossroads of power relations and influences, rather than regarding it as the mere possibility of making decisions on some aspects of a curriculum whose foundations are taken for granted. Such crossroads are increasingly global.

Since the 1980s, transnational organizations, especially OECD, have increasingly produced knowledge for education policies in general and curriculum policies in particular. The 1980s were marked by the development of curriculum autonomy policies that, due to their induced regulating effect (Justino & Almeida, 2017) in national contexts, have led to the, at least rhetorical, transition from the prescriptive uniform curriculum to a paradigm of curriculum autonomy (OECD, 1994, 1998).

This new nationwide paradigm, justified in part by the heterogeneity of the population that the universalization of primary and secondary education has brought to schools in democratic societies, has accentuated the need for both curriculum autonomy in national contexts at the meso or local scales (municipalities, schools, and teachers) and a common core curriculum embodied in the so-called national curricula or core curriculum (OECD, 1994).

From the 1980s onwards, national curricula have been implemented all over Europe. However, their reality is very different in countries with a centralist tradition or in countries with historical paths marked by great local autonomy. In traditionally centralising countries, the “national” curriculum was, from the outset, the only one that existed, although it did not have that designation. The novelty in these contexts is the supposed curriculum autonomy of schools and teachers. By contrast,

in countries with great local autonomy, like the Nordic and Anglo-Saxon countries, the opposite is true: the national curriculum emerges as a regulating factor common to the traditional diversity of options schools could choose from, which were normatized only by external assessments, and therefore appearing as more restraining to schools. (Roldão & Almeida, 2018, p. 13).

Studies have demonstrated that curriculum autonomy policies limit the agency of schools and teachers (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2013) through both input regulation (prescription of content, methods and/or teaching materials) and output regulation (e.g., school inspections or national exams) (Biesta, 2004, 2010; Priestley & Philippou, 2018; Wilkins, 2011).

As stressed by Kuiper and Berkvens (2013), regarding specifically the European setting, although curriculum autonomy has become a catchphrase for education policies, highly prescriptive curriculum policies are still dominant, while other forms of regulation find their place in other systems.

Decentralisation and autonomy are the most common words when we are talking about curriculum freedom. [...] However, Europe shows a wide variety in curriculum regulation and freedom. Some countries have a strong input regulation through highly prescriptive curricula, others use output regulation through tests/exams and inspectorate, others emphasize deregulation by affording schools and teachers space for local curricular decision-making, and others have some sort of a mixture of the above. (Kuiper & Berkvens, 2013, p. 5).

More recently, studies have shown the emergence of a “new curriculum” (Priestley & Biesta, 2013), which means later variants of national curriculum commonplace around the world. These

“new curricula” have tended to neglect the specification of content, emphasising instead the importance of the development of skills and the autonomy of schools and teachers in making the curriculum, in a rhetorical sense at least. Such curricula have become associated with certain problems – lack of attention to knowledge, enactment problems – such as the lack of sense-making by teachers or strategic/superficial compliance (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015).

This has been associated with the presence of ideas of decentralisation of governance and actively including citizens in decision-making processes in the discourse of public sector ‘reform’ in most European countries (Verger & Curran, 2014). This policy direction can, amongst other things, enhance ‘stakeholder’ voice and choice (Brown et al., 2016). The development of participatory approaches to governance, curriculum development, school evaluation, and other educational processes, while conceptually robust, also presents many challenges such as resistance, objections, and drawbacks to parent and student voice in schools (Brown et al., 2020). This has been visible in the participatory design of school buildings (Könings et al., 2017), for example, but also in processes like schools’ self-evaluation and planning (Brown et al., 2021). In the context of curricula, there is growing evidence of the importance of the empowerment of teachers in the design process (Cober et al., 2015; Kali et al., 2015).

Curriculum Studies are familiar with the idea of teachers designing curricula. From Taba (1962), advocating that curriculum development should be a bottom-up process with teachers in central roles for development and leadership, to Schwab (1978) and Stenhouse (1987), strongly advocating the role of the teacher in making curriculum decisions, with the latter putting forward the idea of a teacher-as-researcher, there are early examples of recognition of a central role to be played by teachers. Critical and post-critical theories have emphasized the importance of emancipation, as we have already mentioned, and called for the participation of teachers and other actors in decision-making beyond practice, including decisions related to curriculum policy. Overall, Curriculum Studies have increasingly highlighted that the necessary awareness and reflection should be shared and participated by teachers, students, leaders, and stakeholders.

The long tradition of teacher involvement in curriculum design has encountered various problems (Huizinga et al., 2014) and is currently battling the elusive and erosive instance of autonomy that recent educational reforms and policies brought with them (Priestley & Philippou, 2018). The chapters in this book address several of these issues and challenges from varying national and theoretical perspectives.

In the first section, ‘Curriculum and knowledge’, four chapters develop themes related to the reconceptualization of knowledge, curriculum integration, policies and practices.

Michael Young outlines the history of the field of Sociology of Education, especially its development in England, with reference to the work of Basil Bernstein and his major contribution to this subdiscipline. Bernstein criticized the first two moments in the development of Sociology of Education: the theories of reproduction and the New Sociology of Education. The first theories positioned educational inequalities in society rather than in the educational system. These theories were very deterministic and treated teachers as having a passive role. The New Sociology of Education connected the critique of the social class basis of existing educational

provision to a sociological analysis of the prevailing system focused on curriculum, pedagogy, ability and related topics. Despite its anti-deterministic approach, and the importance it assigned to teachers' potential for change within and outside schools, it had limitations. Young highlights these by putting forward Bernstein's great contribution of distinguishing between what is relayed by education – the social class inequalities – and the content of the 'relay' itself. For Young, what is still lacking in the theories of reproduction that dominated and still dominate much of the Sociology of Education is an analysis of the pedagogical discourse (curriculum and pedagogy, for Bernstein) or the "pedagogization" of the curriculum. Given the new emphasis on knowledge not only in the Sociology of Education but also in Curriculum Studies, theory and policy, transmission has become a key issue, but it needs further discussion.

Sílvia de Almeida develops a socio-historical analysis of curriculum policies expressed in curriculum reforms or reorganisations concerning elementar education that have incorporated dimensions and modalities of curriculum integration in Portugal since Roberto Carneiro's Curriculum Reform (1989-1990) until the recent curriculum flexibility policies (2016-2018). One of the main questions that curriculum theory has raised is how to organize the curriculum selection related to the knowledge and culture of a given society. From the 1990s onwards, and with the recent European curriculum autonomy policies, curriculum integration has increasingly included the agendas of curriculum policies. The author concludes that curriculum integration exists mainly in two dimensions: (a) for formative dimensions, i.e., 'social integration', and (b) towards the connection between subjects, i.e., 'integration of knowledge'. These two dimensions are often associated either with each other or with the different curriculum solutions found. The areas of the 'integration of knowledge' dimension have characterised the Roberto Carneiro Reform from the outset, but their implementation has been very deficient. One of the obstacles to this dimension of curriculum integration is the link between the so-called integrating areas and the subjects with a mobilisation rather than an addition rationale – an aspect that, in the Portuguese case, stems largely from the difficulty of the subject-based organisational structure to accommodate these areas of curriculum. This is partly due to the fact that the integrating areas are conceived in the curriculum separate of subject areas as if the integration of knowledge had its own curriculum space standing apart from the subjects. Only the curriculum reorganisation created by the recent curriculum autonomy policies (2016-2018) has unblushingly reversed this rationale, establishing the 'integration of knowledge' in the 'sacred' space of traditional academic subjects.

The chapter by Maria Figueiredo discusses knowledge in teaching practices in Portuguese Early Childhood Education. By presenting teaching as encompassing different dimensions – organization of the educational environment and interactions – the author argues that deep and flexible content knowledge is needed for Early Childhood Teachers. Even if the role of the content is contentious when teaching is discussed in this context, recent research reveals the relevance of knowledge that permeates the social and material contexts of childhood. The same importance has been signaled for interactions between adults and children about content for expanding children's knowledge and their metacognitive awareness of learning. The chapter then moves the discussion to the Portuguese curricular context, comparing the two versions of the curricular guidelines and discussing data from a national project about curriculum and assessment. The results stress the urgency of making content knowledge visible in the context and in children's play. When the specificity of teaching and content in Early Childhood Education are not highlighted,

the author concludes, formal practices, mimicked from higher levels of education, are felt as needed. This leads to practices with less quality and a loss of pedagogical richness.

José A. Pacheco, Joana Sousa, Ila Beatriz Maia, and Sofia Rodrigues analyze the historical moment of the curriculum field, by discussing issues of knowledge and their relation to the hypothetical end of the crisis in that same field. The authors reflect on the knowledge needed to answer different and divergent questions in a globalized society. Accountability and performativity are two central concepts, also relevant for curriculum policies and curriculum practices. The authors conclude that globalization is creating modes of governance (politics) and governmentality (actors), by imposing accountability processes and performativity practices on education and curriculum. The global policies are moving the curriculum construction from the national to the transnational level. These changes do not occur only at the level of the intended curriculum or at the level of knowledge. The political governance intersects directly as teachers, students and parents look at the classroom, increasingly seen as a political arena of quantitative results, limited to testing, and to training the academic performance production techniques. The authors argue that the classroom becomes a technical space and assessment machinery and not a space for education. It is a piece of machinery driven by market logic, based on the idea that the schools produce winners and losers, like the broad society.

The second section, 'Curriculum Policies', includes two contributions that delve into the social construction of the curriculum and the curriculum of secondary school education.

Pedro Abrantes compares the key landmarks of the curriculum reforms that took place in two countries - Portugal and Spain -, from 1970 to 2005, the core period of political democratization and European integration in both countries, from a socio-historical perspective. The analysis focused on two main curriculum frames: the organisation of different educational stages and the degree of (regional and school) autonomy. In spite of many similarities between both education systems, there were considerable differences in the way the different educational stages were re-configured during this stage, as well as in the process of conceiving and implementing curriculum autonomy. The author concludes that the (re)definition of educational stages and the conception/degree of curriculum autonomy are two key elements to frame curriculum development, and therefore a core issue of education policy debates, in the context of power relations between multiple groups and classes in modern societies.

Menga Lüdke and Felipe Ferreira analyze the curriculum policies regarding secondary school in Brazil, from which students follow into higher education or professional activities. The challenge of combining the two fundamental orientations, preparation for the academic environment and professional life, has long been identified by scholars and policymakers in Brazil. According to the authors, different solutions have been tested, like the Integrated Secondary since 2004 in many schools across the country. The chapter presents part of the evolution of secondary school to frame a discussion about the experience of the new integrated modality. As the idea of a secondary school that sought to integrate the two basic functions began to be tested in some schools, scholars unveiled its challenges and debated its problems intensely. The authors present the debate in Brazil, which is characterized by old impasses surfaced between what was understood as general secondary school education and what was characterized as technical secondary school, a branch of professional education. Heated debates, combining

political and pedagogical arguments, not always with a necessary balance, crossed the late 20<sup>th</sup> century into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, accompanying government initiatives, not always welcomed by teachers and researchers committed to finding solutions to address well-known problems.

Finally, the third section, 'Participatory curriculum design', introduces three contributions related to curricular autonomy, the participation of teachers in curricular design and the concept of curricular relevance.

Francisco Sousa relates curricular autonomy to the concept of relevance, based on the assumption that making autonomous decisions about the curriculum, rather than simply following curriculum guidelines issued by educational authorities, is likely to increase the acknowledgment of curriculum relevance. Considering that the conceptualization of curriculum relevance is rare in the literature, this chapter proposes a model that might facilitate the work of researchers and decision-makers.

Sílvia de Almeida, Joana Viana, Natália Barcelos, Maria do Céu Roldão, and Helena Peralta focus on the unprecedented invitation addressed in 2016 by the Portuguese Ministry of Education to teachers' associations to participate in the process of defining the curriculum at a macro level – the Essential Learning. This chapter explores the dynamics of interaction between teachers' associations in the same subject area and the difficulties felt by the participants. Such difficulties are related to the tradition of individual work by Portuguese teachers and to the multiplicity of official – and sometimes contradictory – curriculum documents produced for over thirty years in Portugal. During that period, the situation of the curriculum documents in Portugal became a mosaic that lost its unity. This study has shown the importance of teachers working collaboratively and being involved at every stage of curriculum development – not only in its implementation but also in deciding about it at the macro-level, especially when the official curriculum results from policies that aim to develop curricular integration in schools.

This section ends with a contribution from Ana Cristina Câmara and Emília Sande Lemos, on behalf of the Geography Teachers Association, from Portugal, about the design of the core curriculum for Geography (Essential Learning), by setting out what is essential to learn in Geography and the competences for the 12 years of compulsory schooling. The authors present the references used for the model of Essential Learning in the particular subject area and the collaborative work that was developed. The model resulted from an approach based on curricular integration, in which connections between different sources of knowledge are sought. It was also based on an analysis of curricular documents from other countries, documents from international organizations, and recent curricular documents from Portugal. The text highlights how to promote systematic debate – with the participation of teachers, parents, and other actors in schools and other educational institutions –, how to monitor schools, and to strengthen teacher education, in order to obtain real feedback about the implementation and about the educational and scientific value of the Essential Learning.

This book confirms that curriculum autonomy is a complex topic, for various reasons, including reasons related to its conceptualization at the theoretical level, its relative importance in different political agendas, and its connection with other educational topics, some of which are especially critical. Teachers' identity and professional development is one of them, inasmuch as political initiatives related to curriculum autonomy cannot survive without teachers' commitment. This book

shows that effective participation of teachers in decisions related to the curriculum is possible. It also shows different ways of supporting curriculum autonomy. Furthermore, it might help readers understand curriculum autonomy at the theoretical level. In short, although it is not exhaustive, it covers a wide range of perspectives, thus contributing to the ongoing debates about the topic.

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