

To understand the work of Ivor Goodson

José Augusto Pacheco
University of Minho
2011

Among his academic contacts of this last decade, the author has become acquainted with several internationally known names in Curriculum Studies both in conferences, colloquia and seminars in Portugal and abroad, as well as in situations of a more private character including the exchange of correspondence and the publication of articles and books.

Ivor Goodson is certainly among those names, whose contribution to the emergence and consolidation of Curriculum Studies has been widely recognised and it can certainly be added that he is an author, who has published books in several different languages, and that his ideas have been debated in the most diverse educational forums¹.

In an interview made with Ivor Goodson in 2008, which will be used further on in this text, he confessed that Basil Bernstein and Lawrence Stenhouse were the two writers, who have most influenced him both academically and personally.

Talking about Basil Bernstein² - a name related to the new Sociology of Education in the 1970s - Goodson mentioned that Bernstein was not only the supervisor of his dissertation but also a consistent source of his thoughts. The sociological and historical construction of the curriculum is a reference that is constantly present in his texts and, thus, it serves as a guideline to his vast work.

In a brief synthesis of his ideas related to the curriculum Bernstein (1971, p. 47) stated that:

“Formal educational knowledge can be considered to be realized through three message systems: curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation. Curriculum defines what counts as valid knowledge, pedagogy defines what counts as a valid transmission of knowledge, and evaluation defines what counts as a valid realization of this knowledge on the part of the taught.”

¹ In Portugal, Ivor Goodson has published the following books: *A Construção Social do Currículo* (Educa, 1997); *Currículo e Mudança. A Construção Social do Currículo* (Porto Editora, 2001); and *Conhecimento e Vida Profissional do Professor* (Porto Editora, 2008a).

² Apart from the reading of the mandatory book: *Class, Codes and Control*, which was published in 1975 and translated into Portuguese by Editora Vozes in 1996 as *A Estruturação do Discurso Pedagógico. Classe, Códigos e Controle*, see the synthesis made by Tomaz Tadeu da Silva in *Teorias do Currículo. Uma Introdução Crítica* (pp. 74-80) published by Porto Editora in 2000. See also the book entitled *A Teoria de Bernstein em Sociologia da Educação* by Ana Maria Domingos *et al*, which was published in 1986 by the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian.

With a PhD in History followed by five years of professional experience in secondary school teaching, which was probably - as he says - the most interesting five years of his life before returning to the university, Goodson had learned from Bernstein that curriculum is a social construction and that its construction is related to the power of social groups.

By defending these ideas, Goodson tried to respond in an investigative way to the origins of curriculum by going as far as to ask: “Where the hell does curriculum come from?”³

If curriculum is related to the social construction of school subjects or curriculum is knowledge within selected and organised forms, as Basil Bernstein puts it, its origin cannot avoid being profoundly historical, which means that to investigate curriculum is to understand the social conflict that makes it possible in the perspective of given historical realities. In that sense and pointing out the etymological origin of the term (*currere*), he followed the conception of curriculum as socially constructed and defined, as a route to follow or, more significantly, to present by trying to stress the homologous relationship that exists between curriculum and school subjects (Goodson, 1997; 2001).

Consequently, to study the social history of school subjects - in the exploration of the macro-power relationships - has been one of the tasks of Goodson, who was trying to analyse power that he understood as an “impregnable fortress,” as Kliebard (1995) sustains, which has such an influence in the national curriculum. Therefore, one of his first battles in curriculum studies was the legitimisation of a paradigm change that proposed that curriculum histories should allow for a systematic analysis of what is continuously and non-continuously selected and constructed including resistance from schools to what is decided at the national level (Goodson, 2001).

Apart from the historical-cultural study of school subjects – Geography, History, Environmental Studies, Rural Studies, among others – Goodson has conferred substantial importance to curriculum differentiation, especially since the curriculum was given the power both to designate and to differentiate.

Understanding curriculum as a mechanism of social differentiation within the underlying ideas of the New Sociology of Education to which Michael Young is related, Goodson recognised⁴ that knowledge is also penetrated by power, having been influenced in

³ cf. Joe Kincheloe, 2001, p. 29, *Introdução [O Currículo em Mudança. Estudos na Construção Social do Currículo]*.

⁴ “These are social questions and, of course, it’s true – whose knowledge is it? Knowledge is always penetrated by power. I mean, I’m much influenced by Foucault and I’m much influenced by Bourdieu, Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist. Both of them - in very sophisticated ways - put the question of whose knowledge is

this analysis by Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, as well as recognising some influence from Marxist theory, despite affirming that he is not a Marxist.

When asked if he considered himself to be a Marxist or post-Marxist - a question now in vogue - his answer about the theory was that:

“it’s a very important tool, but it’s not the only tool. And it’s not the final answer. The final answer always is what the data is telling you and you can’t know the final answer before you ask the question. That’s the critical difference here. So Marxism is very important, so are other things, but it is not an answer that precedes the question” (Data collected by Interview, Braga, 2008)..

And because he recognised that curriculum internalises the social division of work, Goodson centred his study on the curriculum as an “analytical tool, useful for the study of the social interests that are integrated in the structure of knowledge itself” (Goodson, 2001, p. 212) by applying it in research projects that took place in several different English schools including Technical Schools and Grammar Schools with the goal of analysing the assumptions of curricular offerings and their implications in the social differentiation of the students, as he mentions, in order:

“to fully understand the process of schooling, it is necessary to look at the core of the curriculum. The complex enigma of teaching may be partly understood if we apprehend the inner process of curricular stability and change” (*Ibid.*, p. 230).

Starting from these assumptions and objectives, Goodson proposed in *Notes for a curriculum theory*⁵ the distinction between curriculum for the brain and curriculum for the hands. He related the first to knowledge decontextualised and made accessible to a larger group and the last to a contextualized knowledge, which was a vehicle to a theoretical teaching of a more general character. Basically these are two strands of thought that have been associated with schooling and have led to many discussions on whether the brain or the hands should be favoured in education. These thoughts have always been present when analysing the career opportunities of a student and they still exist in present times.

With respect to Lawrence Stenhouse and his influence on the work of Goodson, as Goodson recognises, it could be said that Stenhouse had a decisive role in the importance that Goodson confers on the teacher, on the one hand, and to the researcher-teacher, on the other hand. The teacher becomes a researcher when he reflects about his own practice, despite the fact that this important idea contains some dangerous elements:

“I think it is because he invented the idea of the teacher as researcher and which then became action research and other things, but the crucial idea was the idea that the teacher should also be a

this and what kind of knowledge. And I would say that French sociology has been, through Foucault and Bourdieu, very influential for me” (Data collected by Interview, Braga, 2008).

⁵ Chapter X of the book: *The Changing Curriculum: Studies in Social Construction*.

researcher of her or his practice and that is an important idea with some dangerous elements but it is an important idea” (Data collected by Interview, Braga, 2008.).

According to Stenhouse (1975), the school classroom is the cornerstone of teacher investigation not in the sense of empirical research but in that of the problematisation and questioning of his or her daily practice. The researcher-teacher represents, above all, an attitude of questioning and critical commitment towards what he or she does in the class room with his or her pupils.

Admitting that he has been influenced in his ideas by existentialism - mostly in respect of its understanding of life experience - and equally by Paulo Freire, due to the fact that his reading of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* allowed him to think of how curriculum is related to oppression, Goodson explored the relationship between “structure” and “agency.” He considered that both are fundamental in curricular analysis, as he explained in his book *Studying Curriculum*, which was published in 1994 but he is also very much interested in the negotiation that exists between agency and structure:

“I’m always most interested in studying the middle ground, as I call it in the book “Studying Curriculum,” between structure and agency. So I’m interested in looking at – I always think structure is important and I always think agency is important but I’m interested in where it is that structure and agency gets mediated. For example, the curriculum is where structure and agency negotiate. School subjects are where things get negotiated, school classrooms are. I want to look at that negotiation because what I say to you is: the negotiation can go in many directions. I don’t believe it is structurally determined. Structure sets parameters, but action can always react . So you never know, until you study it, what the relationship between structure and agency is” (Goodson, 2009, p.??).

As he does not believe in what is structurally determined, he argued that the discussion can flow in several different directions and that what is more important is to understand how the social construction of curriculum is influenced by the professional lives of teachers. Therefore, agency is not in the school or the class room but in the teacher. Without plunging into practical fundamentalism this does not mean acceptance of the belief that everything in education should be about practical understanding and without any relation to context and theory. In that sense he said:

“I’m against what I call practical fundamentalism, by which I mean the belief that all of education, all of educational study, should be about understanding practice. I do absolutely agree that practice is a crucial area of study and that we have to honour and respect practice. I absolutely believe that. What I do not believe is that our study and education should only be about practice. I think you have to retain a space for theory and foundation roles. Without that, the teacher’s knowledge becomes just practical and teacher professionalism loses its claim to status and prestige. So it would be a great loss for teachers if all they were seen as just practicing people. They also need to be seen as public intellectuals” (Goodson, 2009, p. 145).

By saying that his interest is to negotiate between structure and agency or in what he calls the “middle-ground,” Goodson is constructing an academic singularity as to what refers

to the origin and construction of curriculum by making a bridge between the general aspects of cultural dynamics (macro-theories), which include educational inequalities, and the interaction aspects within the class room (micro-theories). As Joe Kincheloe stresses (2001), Goodson has united theory and practice i.e. the macro and the micro, thus positioning himself at an intermediate level between the theoretical and the practical - a placement which allows for a specific understanding of the complex process that is the relationship between power and curriculum.

Also being influenced by phenomenology and recognising once more the influence of Stenhouse by saying what is needed is “a story of action within a theory of context,” Goodson makes a distinction between life story and life history:

“The life story is the initial selected account that people give of their lives. The life history is the triangulated account, one point of the tripod being the life story and the other two points other people’s testimony, documentary testimony, and the transcripts and archives that appertain to the life in question” (Goodson, 1998, p. 5).

“The distinction that puts that together again, which is that the life story, in my terms, is the individual story that a person tells. The life history sets that personal story in the historical context. So, for me, the critical distinction in all of the work I’m now doing is the embrace of the life history method, which puts together the personal and the social. I never want to get drawn into just individual stories, individual narrations. They are important, but they’re also crucial ways to understand the social and political” (Goodson, 2009, p.??).

In this case he defends the position that teachers should never be limited to “stories of action” and that they should address “theories of context” in order to understand what it means to be a teacher and how the profession is being changed by governmental measures.

Like William Pinar, Goodson believes that there is an inter-relationship between both public and private spheres and that curriculum study must be socially and personally oriented, as it represents a possibility of training that is not prescriptive but in which the teacher plays a crucial role. He denies that there is a split between the political and the personal sides and he argues, if a split exists, it is negative for the field, since curriculum study demands that both sides should be addressed. He recognises that the personal side is essential, although he never wishes to lose the notion of the social side. Therefore, he attributes to the teachers a leading role in the analysis of educational and curricular reforms.

In one of his latest books, which has just been published in Portugal, namely, *Conhecimento e Vida Profissional*, Goodson addresses the purpose of understanding the ways in which teachers respond to governmental reforms, as the present time is one of great world-wide reforms, and in order to achieve that goal it is necessary to understand their lives and work. In order to avoid that the teacher is neither circumscribed by practical fundamentalism nor the bureaucracy of his daily administrative tasks from the perspective that William Pinar

(2004⁶) calls “social reengineering,” it is necessary that he or she should not become a subservient technician, who does only what the government tells him to do:

“And teachers must never be only seen as “stories of action;” they also have to be given theories of context to understand, for example, why what it is to be a teacher is being changed by governments at the moment. Once the teacher was an autonomous and decentralized profession, now, he or she is becoming a compliant technician doing what the government tells them. And that’s a big contextual change (Goodson, 2009, p. 145).

This study was done based on what he calls the “refraction process,” which means that the changes that have occurred in a trans-national and supra-national level intersect with the changes that have occurred on a local level. The refraction occurs when the macro-world movement functions within the micro-world, which is constantly changing based on a process of negotiation. In that way it becomes necessary to deepen the impact of globalisation on the work of the teacher:

“Sometimes, the globalised intentions, you can see the professional teacher being reframed that way. Sometimes they resist. Sometimes they decouple. And you don’t know until you’ve studied the individual teacher’s classroom what is happening *vis à vis* globalization. It may be working out, it may not be. That’s why this journey from the macro-globalised to the micro-local is a perilous journey and you have to study that journey before you know how the teacher and the practice is acting. You don’t know till you’ve studied it” (Goodson, 2009, p. 148).

By provoking similarities between schools and the work contexts of teaching, globalisation can be increased by the school, above all through a world-wide notion of school contents present in the national curriculum, although Goodson recognises that this process opens some space for differences:

“I think the whole notion of school subjects is it’s a world movement. So those things are the same. They might be taught differently, but they are the same. But within that, there is still variety in the classroom. So, the varieties in the degree to which teachers have to teach to a detailed curriculum. These are the big differences, so there are school subjects. But what goes on underneath may be very different according to how much freedom the teacher has as a professional” (Goodson, 2009, p.149).

However, the effects of globalisation are felt in a tangible way through the purposes of standardisation of the curriculum - of which the Bologna Process in the European Union is a good example - without having caused protest on the part of the teacher,⁷ because it

⁶ Also published in Portugal by Porto Editora, *O que é Teoria do Currículo?*

⁷ “Well, I think what’s very surprising for me in England, is the degree to which the English who have traditionally been, shall we say freedom loving, have accepted standardization, have accepted targets, tests and tables - the three “T’s”. I’m astonished by the last 20 years in England and how easily it has been to standardize education. And how curriculum scholars, for example, have not been involved in any kind of contest around that. I mean, some of the most important work on the social construction of curriculum came out of England but none of the lessons of that work have been used since the National Curriculum was pronounced. It is a sad and sorry story what has happened in Britain and

recognises that we live in a more practical world that affords a certain degree of mobility and standardisation. In this case, the changes that are currently taking place will not lead to a total harmonisation but can contribute to the reaching of other levels of education.

Nevertheless and because he also shares the notion that in educational terms tylerian ideas are presently returning, Goodson considered that globalisation represents the appropriate moment to raise questions about central issues that have been part of curricular theory, such as: “Why the national curriculum? What kind of knowledge is the national curriculum privileging and prioritising?” (Data collected by Interview, Braga, 2008).

As these questions have not been posed in the last 10 to 15 years, Goodson reaffirms that such omission proves that:

“the curriculum theory has moved away from understanding social context and understanding social construction. And for me, that’s one of the sadnesses of what has happened to curriculum theory globally. It has moved away from its main social mission into delivery” (*Ibid.*).

In this sense, the ideas of Goodson, which are fully sustained by international research projects, are still fundamental not only because he is still a mandatory reference in the area of curriculum⁸ but also in its social interpretation, since the publication of his first book: *School, Subject and Curriculum Change* until his most recent texts.

In times of globalisation and significant changes in education and training, Goodson is a theoretical reference for understanding curricular changes and for the restructuring of education. This is especially so concerning the role of teachers,⁹ whose knowledge and life need be related to the social histories of educational change in relation to the importance of their time and to their life stories, as he demonstrates in the book *The Politics of Curriculum and Schooling: Historical Approaches*.¹⁰

And to finish, as he argues, if one aims at understanding the social and the political, one has to understand the personal and biographical. The methodology he proposed, which he has persistently adopted himself,¹¹ is that of the biographical approach, which he used and uses both as an individual life policy for the analysis of educational changes and as a fundamental

how, in a sense, the standardization movement has not been as contested as it has in other countries” (Goodson 2009, p 150).

⁸ For Tomaz Tadeu da Silva, Ivor Goodson, through his research and theoretical production: “tries to demonstrate, that the categories by which we see and construct educational curriculum are the result of a slow process of social fabrication in which conflict, rupture and ambiguity have been present” (cf. Introduction, 1995.). See also the preface by António Flávio Moreira in the book entitled *As políticas de Currículo e de Escolarização*.

⁹ The role of teacher has been analysed by Ivor Goodson in many of his writings that have as their central idea that curriculum is an invention created to direct and control the autonomy of the teacher and his freedom in the class room (See *The Making of Curriculum*, 1995).

¹⁰ Brazilian translation by Editora Vozes of *As políticas de Currículo e de Escolarização* (cf. Goodson, 2008b).

¹¹ See, for example, the book *Studying Curriculum: Cases and Methods*.

step for the understanding of the curriculum as a narrative that represents the path to a new social future in his perspective.

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