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CURRICULUM AND SOCIETY: RETHINKING THE LINK

ALICIA DE ALBA

Abstract – This article argues that the link between educational curricula and society as a whole has become critically uncertain. This crisis is linked to a number of factors related to the post-modern world view, including: the disappearance of grand utopian social visions of the kind that used to underpin educational policy; the lack of adequate theoretical tools; and the way in which academics are exposed to a multitude of different cultural contacts. The author argues that this situation calls for a fundamental re-thinking of the link between curriculum and society, based on a more flexible and pluralistic approach.

Zusammenfassung – In diesem Artikel wird dargelegt, daß die Verbindung zwischen Lehrplänen und der Gesellschaft als Ganzes in bedenklicher Weise unsicher geworden ist. Diese Krise wird auf eine Anzahl von mit dem postmodernen Weltbild verbundenen Faktoren zurückgeführt, darunter das Verschwinden der großen utopischen sozialen Visionen, die die Bildungspolitik unterstützten, der Mangel an adäquatem theoretischem Werkzeug und der Tatsache, daß Akademiker unter dem Einfluß einer Vielzahl verschiedener kultureller Zusammenhänge stehen. Der Autor argumentiert, daß dieser Zustand ein grundsätzliches Überdenken der Verbindung zwischen Lehrplan und Gesellschaft erfordert, basierend auf einer flexibleren und pluralistischeren Verfahrensweise.

Résumé – Cet article émet l'avis que la relation entre le programme éducatif et la société dans son ensemble est devenue dangereusement aléatoire. Cette crise est due à divers facteurs liés à la conception du monde postmoderne, comme la disparition de grandes visions sociales utopiques telles qu'elles étaient utilisées pour étayer les politiques éducatives, le manque d'instruments théoriques appropriés, ou le fait que les universitaires sont confrontés à une multitude de normes culturelles différentes. L'auteur soutient que cette situation exige de repenser radicalement la relation entre programme éducatif et société, en partant d'une approche flexible et pluraliste.

Resumen – El artículo sostiene que el nexo existente entre los planes de estudio y la sociedad como un conjunto se ha vuelto críticamente inestable. Esta crisis viene aparejada con un número de factores relacionados con una visión postmoderna, incluyendo la desaparición de grandes visiones sociales utópicas como aquellas que han servido para apuntalar la política educacional, la falta de herramientas teóricas adecuadas y el modo en el que los académicos se ven expuestos a una multitud de diferentes contactos culturales. El autor argumenta que esta situación reclama una reconsideración fundamental del nexo existente entre los planes de estudio y la sociedad, basado sobre un enfoque más flexible y pluralístico.

Резюме - В статье утверждается, что связь между образовательной программой и обществом стала критически неопределенной. Этот кризис связывается с целым рядом факторов, имеющих отношение к



постмодернистскому взгляду на мир, в том числе: исчезновение больших утопических социальных визий, которые в свое время являлись определяющим фактором образовательной политики; недостаток адекватных теоретических инструментов, а также то, как академическое общество подчиняется большому количеству различных культурных норм. Автор утверждает, что эта ситуация требует фундаментального переосмысления связи между программой обучения и обществом, основанной на более гибком и плюралистическом подходе.

There are different modes of integration, transformation, combination, distortion and appropriation, which make it difficult to delimit movements into classifiable identities. This multiplicity cannot be reduced to a tabular order – fixed and stable – because of differences, on the one hand, between diverse cultural traditions and states, and the opening of spaces among disciplines, on the other.

Michael Peters,
*Nietzsche, Poststructuralism and Education:
After the Subject?*

In contrast to the situation in the 1960s and 70s, and even parts of the 80s when the school was accorded a particular social role, the link today between curriculum and society has become profoundly uncertain. In the complex and crisis-ridden times we live in, it has become almost impossible to define a role for the curriculum in debates about the shape of the world we wish to inhabit. The making of this link between curriculum and society is rendered all the more difficult because of the absence of what we might call utopian visions.¹ In the past we had access to utopian visions which spawned important social projects, such as socialism, which in turn inspired particular understandings of the role of the school in promoting social change.

The rapid changes that have occurred around the globe after the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, combined with the erosion of the epistemological foundations of Western thought, have placed the educational field and, within it, the curriculum, in an extremely complex situation. This condition can be looked at in a number of ways. Among these, it might be said that:

- a) academics have not been able to constitute themselves as subjects (*as agents*) in the context of the process of curricular overdetermination (de Alba 1995a);
- b) the complex surface of inscription of education and the curriculum (i.e. the space in which discourse might be inserted), is marked by the presence of split subjects (i.e. subjects who are the products of processes of hybridi-

- sation, contestation and negotiation) and is overlaid by the social contours of a multiplicity of movements, social trends and emergent practices;
- c) there is an absence of adequate theoretical tools (until recently these tools were sufficient for helping us understand educational problems);
 - d) there has been an increase in cultural contact and this has had a large impact on both the social and educational spheres.

This article seeks to develop these ways of understanding the relationship between curriculum and society and begins with the premise that there is a need to rethink this relationship to enable us to recapture a purposeful, critical and analytical view of our work in education. In seeking to recapture such a purposeful, critical and analytic view, it is important to understand the nature of the crisis in which the field of curriculum finds itself. The field is characterised by a generalised crisis exemplified by the retreat of grand narratives and the emergence of a multiplicity of competing social trends and movements. Contemporaneous with this crisis, has been an intensification of cultural contact in a multiform and multidirectional way which has not only contributed to processes of decentring amongst individuals (hence the notion of split subjects), but has also served to decentre the centre itself.

Surface of inscription:² social traits and contours

I have argued elsewhere (de Alba 1991) that the curriculum is a political-educational project constituted by a synthesis or an articulation of cultural elements derived from fights, impositions and negotiations amongst different social subjects. These conflicts and negotiations embrace a range of social-political projects and portend how society is to be educated.

As mentioned above, one of the most serious developments confronting us in the area of the curriculum is the retreat of socio-political projects which involve particular narrations of the curriculum-society relationship and which help to constitute and sustain the subjects (agents) of the processes of curricular overdetermination. Such subjects play formative roles and sustain educational projects in relation to these socio-political projects. With the weakening of the grand narrative in education and curriculum, the question that arises is twofold:

How do we understand and reconstitute the curriculum-society link within societies that are in crisis and that lack wide and ambitious socio-political projects? And what is the position of the social and curricular subject in these societies, given the absence of utopian horizons and projects?

Towards understanding this crisis and the role of subjects within it, it could be put that through the processes of crisis, what can be observed is the emergence of social traits and contours which prefigure the articulation of incipient hegemonic practices. Traits, in this explanation, refer to new or residual elements from [current and precarious or] previous social configu-

rations, which show themselves in a significant way, in a social space and accomplish two functions. In the first instance, they contribute to the dislocation of the order of things within the crisis situation. In the second, they emerge as traces in the contours of new discursive social configurations. Traits are thus elements which do not have the ability to articulate the past, present and the future, and their importance resides in their ability to erupt (unexpectedly) and to disrupt the textured overlays of meaning which permeate the society. They are, therefore, elements that linger on dangerously in new discursive³ configurations; but at the same time, because of their very residualness, they might wither altogether (de Alba 1995a). They emerge and are present during the early stages of a social crisis.

Contours are shaped by a set of emerging elements in society in the process of generalised structural crisis. Contours are traits which coalesce and can be identified by their eruptive tendencies. Contours have a greater capacity for articulation than traits and can be observed in advanced moments of the crisis. They are constituted and are present as the articulation of initial and incipient meanings in the making (and genealogy) of a social configuration. They can have, thus, the ability to articulate and constitute themselves as master signifiers.⁴ Like traits they can also go in the opposite direction. As new social configurations unfold, they can disappear and be excluded from the social and curricular terrain (de Alba 1995a.)

Seen in this way, social traits and contours are constituted elements on the surface of the inscriptive field of the curriculum. They, in turn, provide the contextual space for the constitution of specific social and curricular subjects. Social traits and contours thus interpellate⁵ and provide for the constitution of subjects and, critically, the possibility for the creation of the curriculum-society link. I wish to argue, therefore, that in the contemporary world, it is social traits and contours, as opposed to grand projects, which constitute the surface of inscription of the curriculum. They are inextricably linked with the broad social changes that have impacted on the different spaces and levels of reality which make up our social reality. Amongst the most important, these changes are: environmental crisis, the meteoric advances in science and technology (particularly in information technology), the intensification of cultural contact, geopolitical recomposition, poverty, famine, globalisation⁶ and the increasing emphasis of difference.

Subjects of curriculum. After the death of the subject?

The conceptual tools in the field of education and, within that, the field of the curriculum, which were dominant until the 1970s and 80s, have shown themselves to be inadequate in explaining some of the most urgent problems we are facing today. One such problem relates to the withering of a coherent notion of the subject, that is to say the individual self as a conscious source of thought and action.

The notion of a coherent subject – a corner-stone of Western thought – has been seriously eroded. The work of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Wittgenstein, amongst others, has produced new discursive frameworks in which autonomous subjects have all but disappeared in the face of the totalising discourses of science and progress which have prefigured “the death of the subject”. This work has been significantly advanced in post-structuralist thought, with authors like Lacan, Foucault and Derrida. Peters (1997), reflecting on the power of this new theory, suggests that we now cannot continue thinking about the subject in the same way.⁷

The modern subject has been characterised as centred, rational and avant-garde. He/she is a subject centred in a strong, primary identification with rationality as his/her main *motif*. This rationality is embodied in the ideal of a subject able to contribute to the acceleration of structural change and able to shape history. The modern subject is thus the subject of social change operating through and with strong socio-political projects. He/she is the subject of the modern curriculum and has been interpellated for and constituted by the great historical, social and political projects, by the great meta-narratives (Lyotard 1979). However, the modern subject has immense difficulty in realising his or her subjecthood or subjectivity in post-modern societies which are governed by suspicion, uncertainty and scepticism.

Foucault (1972, 1980 and 1982), Lacan (1956–57, 1964, 1987a and 1987b), Derrida (1966 and 1968), Laclau (1990 and 1996), Hall (1996), and Žižek (1990), among others, have reformulated [resetled] the concept of the subject in different ways since its “subject death”. They have represented the position of the subject in terms of the subject as lack, the subject as a moment of decision, the subject as reiterative power of discourse (effect of power), and as a subject split by the multiplicity of discourses surrounding him or her. We thus have a subject that is not pre-determined but rather can be constructed in successive and persistent processes of identification and reidentification.

In the field of education, authors from different around the world have concerned themselves with the question of the subject for the last decade: Peters and Marshall (1997) in Australasia, Giroux (1992) and McLaren (1989, 1995 and 1997) in the United States, Puiggrós (1990, 1992 and 1995), Buenfil (1991 and 1994), Gómez Sollano (1992) and de Alba (1991, 1995a, 1996a and 1997) in Argentina and Mexico, amongst others.

The split subject, the subject that is constituted in the moment of decision, is post-foundational, anti-essentialist, and post-modern. He/she is the subject of the crisis and of the uncertainty of today’s world. He/she is the current subject in the process of curricular overdetermination. This subject is interpellated by the social traits and contours emerging from the crisis and is defined by his/her ability to respond to such interpellations.

The question may be asked why it is important to (re)incorporate this split subject into the field of the curriculum (after its supposed ‘death’) and how it can be done. Reincorporating the split subject is of profound importance because split subjects, in comparison with their singular and ‘coherent’

antecedents operating in the discursive ether of the grand-narrative, are constituted as subjects with a number of different positions and postures to the world. They do not seek to resolve problems once and for all, and assume their historical and generational responsibility with the awareness that the world they inhabit is one of infinite complexity.

In these new conditions of intelligibility and with these new surfaces of inscription, it is possible to face the crisis, either from a very pessimistic point of view, or to regard it as a terrain of new possibilities. With reference to this discussion, Laclau and Mouffe say:

There is no room here for disappointment (. . .) Hopelessness in this matter is only proper to those who, to borrow a phrase from J. B. Priestley, have lived for years in a fool's paradise and then abruptly move on to invent a fool's hell for themselves. We are living, on the contrary, in one of the most exhilarating moments of the twentieth century: a moment in which new generations, without the prejudices of the past, without theories presenting themselves as 'absolute truths' of history, are constructing new emancipatory discourses, more human, diversified and democratic. The eschatological and epistemological ambitions are more modest, but the liberating aspirations are wider and deeper. (Laclau and Mouffe 1990: 98)

In seeking to pursue this possibility, it is important that the notion of the subject's positionality is examined as a way of understanding how we might proceed conceptually and politically in the field of the curriculum. Positionality is crucial in the context of the crisis in which we find ourselves. Faced with social traits and contours – instead of grand social projects – what we have in the field are split subjects who live in a world of intense cultural contact which serves as a constant challenge. I want to argue that it is important to confront the issue of positionality and to locate and specify our own positionality in order to construct new modalities of communication with others in a world where cultural contact is increasing each day.

Positionality must be understood as the psychic, cultural, social, geopolitical, economic, etc. space, from which the world is enunciated and through which it is constructed. Discourse positionality is defined by the specificity of the social fabric in which the enunciator belongs. It might, therefore, be understood as an enunciative space (de Alba 1996a: 10).

Curricular overdetermination, cultural contact and traits and contours

We have now seen that the contemporary subject, after the “death of the subject”, is constituted and inscribed on the surface of inscription of education by social traits and contours emerging from the dislocated society and is profoundly affected, as a generational subject, by cultural contact.

Even though, in different times in history, there have been moments of intense cultural contact which have given rise to new cultures and nations, it is true to say that the frequency, depth and diversity of cultural interaction is

more intense than it has been before. Cultural contact⁸ refers to the exchanges of cultural goods and interrelationships among groups, sectors and/or individuals of different cultures. It refers to the transaction of different semiotic codes and the different use of signs (signifiers and signified). As a space in which different discourses interact, its outcomes are new semiotic fields which produce changes in the different subjects inhabiting it. It occurs in several social spaces in a multiplicity of ways interpellated by complex power relationships. Cultural contact is thus relational, unequal, conflictive and productive. It is produced through complex identification processes.⁹

Cultural contact is relational because it is generated, produced and defined in the context of open and precarious relationships. It is constituted and produced within and amongst several articulated meaning systems. That is, it occurs among diverse cultures that have different symbolic economies where symbolic goods and different ways of symbolisation are transacted. The entry of one culture into another and the complex and conflictive encounter which results produce a cultural dislocation that affects the relationality of the meaning systems or cultural systems.

Cultural contact is also conflictive because the subjects involved in it experience structural difficulties in establishing modalities of communication. They are, thus, compelled to construct new arenas of meaning that work as bridges among and between their distinct semiotic codes. While building these arenas, however, they are under pressure to honour and reproduce the constitutive traits of their identity. This struggle is constituted as a relational tension between culture as metonymy and culture as metaphor. One can say it is the expression of different signifiers in their fight to hegemonize the symbolic and cultural space, by trying to reconstitute some signifiers as empty and master signifiers.

From a historical point of view, cultural contact is often unequal because when two or more cultures come into contact they have to negotiate the tension between the desire to dominate and the longing to develop mechanisms which preserve the constitutive traits of their identities. Domination produces its own conditions of possibility in so far as the very conditions of the cultural contact bring with them access to new technology, ideas and practices. A certain productivity emanates from this situation because the relationality, the conflictive characteristics and the unequal relationships which develop during cultural contact permit and accelerate the dislocation of the subjects identities. Multiple interpellations are produced among the subjects, floating signifiers proliferate and through mechanisms of identification new traits and new condensations of meanings are generated. New semiotic and semantic elements permit not only communication among cultures and their subjects but also their transformation and, with long and intense periods of contact, the emergence of new cultures.

The productive character of the process thus refers to its capacity to overdetermine and articulate several discontinuous and uneven moments. It refers to its metaphorical or paradigmatic capacity to take one or several empty

signifiers and to make them nodal in so far as they condense and articulate new meanings.

Cultural contact also plays the role of dislocating old certainties as well as producing new and incipient understandings. It changes the language games¹⁰ in which the split subject is constituted and performs. In doing this, it also changes the language games' rules and goes further than any kind of multi-culturalism.

In the current context of crisis, cultural contact is constitutive of new social spaces characterised by traits and contours. Within those spaces are to be found arenas for public discourse from which emanates the curricula. Public spaces are characterised by a) visibility of speech and action (information); b) the possibility of the exchange of ideas, opinions and arguments about information; and c) the possibility of reaching agreements and taking action based on this information and as a result, discussion about this information (see Arditì 1996, and Arendt 1958).

These characteristics – flow and visibility of messages, discussions, agreements and actions – are found in traditional public spaces, what we might call intermittent public spaces, and also virtual public spaces. Traditional public spaces are usually located around issues which are located in specific and known space and time. Intermittent public spaces are located in specific moments and places which appear and disappear and change. And virtual public spaces take place in cyberspace, internet and e-mail, amongst others. This last kind of public space is particularly marked by cultural contact as a result of the necessity of new communicative language forms and the unlimited possibilities of communication and contact.

In the field of the curriculum, the cultural contact serves to disrupt the surface of inscription of the field and presents itself as a challenge to rethink the curriculum and to formulate new proposals. It reveals itself as an experience which is constitutive of the new public spaces in which the curriculum is overdetermined and developed.

Conclusion

In our current crisis-ridden societies it is important to rethink how work in the field of the curriculum might be conducted. While the trajectory of the crisis has been leading towards the disempowerment of the active subject, subjectivity remains possible and might even be pursued. As I have tried to argue in this article, this possibility might be pursued along the following lines:

- a) The retrieval and the incorporation of the concept of the subject “after the death of the subject” and the introduction of the notion of positionality;
- b) The recognition of new forms of the curriculum-society link, located in

- the social traits and contours that emerge from the current processes of crisis; and,
- c) the incorporation of cultural contact as a challenge and as a constitutive force within new social spaces.

What an approach such as this makes possible is the recovery of the notion of a social project. Cast in this light, the social project, however, is fundamentally less imperialistic and is underscored by a deep sense of its partiality. It is through this the possibility of establishing the curriculum-society link, from social traits and contours, is enhanced. What this permits is a broad conceptual framework which recognises the possibilities for the emergence of new articulations and the emergence, through cultural contact, of a new and vibrant public sphere, in which many divergent subjects can participate and a new democracy might be forged.

Notes

1. I agree with Laclau (1998) that Neo-Liberalism is in crisis too. In that sense, one cannot consider it a hegemonic social project.
2. I use "surface of inscription" in the Derridean sense. See Derrida 1966 and 1968.
3. Discourse is "a meaningful totality which transcends the distinction between the linguistic and the extra-linguistic. (. . .) the impossibility of a closed totality unties the connection between signifier and signified. In that sense there is a proliferation of 'floating signifiers' in society, and political competition can be seen as attempts by rival political forces to partially fix those signifiers to particular signifying configurations" (Laclau 1993: 435).
4. See Žižek 1990 and Lacan 1987.
5. I am using the notion of interpellation in a Lacanian and Laclauian way.
6. Globalisation, however, is used mainly in an economic sense. It is used here in the sense of a social contour in the sense that what happens in one part of the world impacts in a multiplicity of ways in other parts of the world too.
7. "I am inclined to paraphrase Ferry and Renault thus: it is impossible to return innocently to the Hegelian or phenomenological subject after Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Lyotard (and here these proper names stand as emblems) Peters 1997: 12.
8. About cultural contact, see de Alba and Gutiérrez 1986, González Gaudiano and de Alba 1994 and de Alba 1995.
9. The notion of identification is used mainly from a psychoanalytic view and also from a discourse analysis view.
10. The notion of language games derives from Wittgenstein 1953.

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