

Multicultural Curriculum and De-Essentialisation of Identities: a case study in a municipal initiative in Brazil

ANA IVENICKI

Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

ABSTRACT The present paper discusses the main categories and the argument that informed the construction of curricular guidelines in a municipality in Brazil, taken as a case study. The curricular guidelines were based on a multicultural approach that focuses on the need for curriculum to promote social inclusion, as well as anti-racist and de-essentialised perspectives towards identity construction. The methodology was design-based research, which has a practical nature similar to action-research, but in which the presence of a partnership between the researcher and the educational actors involved has been a prerequisite. Challenges were pinpointed and addressed in the process, such as: the legitimacy of the very idea of the construction of guidelines; the active participation of higher education and school actors in the curricular guidelines' construction; and a multicultural, de-essentialised and de-colonised curriculum perspective, which was faced through the insertion of integrative curricular themes and dimensions that could reflect those concerns. The study is relevant comparatively in that it may arguably illustrate the challenges and potentials involved in processes that try to translate social inclusion and multiculturalism into curricular proposals.

Key words: multicultural curriculum; cultural diversity; social inclusion; Brazil

Introduction

The present study draws on a multicultural perspective in order to discuss a curriculum initiative in a municipality in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The initiative was taken by local educational authorities, who approached the researcher so that primary school municipal curriculum guidelines could reflect the valuing of diversity, and the challenging of racism and stereotypes. The main argument that underpins the study and that informed the construction of the curriculum guidelines was that identity building is inherent to curriculum proposals, and that identity should be viewed as hybrid, transitory and fluid (Banks, 2004; Bekerman, *et al.*, 2009; Canen & Peters, 2005; Hall, 2003; Peters, 2005; Silva, 2002). In that sense, the relevance of such a perspective was justified in that de-essentialising identities should help teachers and pupils understand the need to challenge dichotomised approaches that freeze “I” and “the other”, being the cornerstone of a multicultural approach that is intended to problematise hegemonic, homogenised and monocultural curricular discourses, so as to value equity and minority education.

In fact, racism and discrimination have been part of the construction of some identities in different societies, including the Brazilian one. In that sense, the construction of curricular guidelines geared towards multicultural perspectives was central. That process has had to face some challenges, based on a framework discussed in Canen (2011), in which the tension between unity and diversity, as pointed out by authors such as Banks (2004), Peters (2005), Kymlicka (2004), Canen and Peters (2005), among others, was present from the onset. That dimension has meant that rather than presenting contents as universal truths, the contributions of diverse peoples to knowledge building, as well as the extent to which diversity and unity have been present in their approaches should be acknowledged. Also, the tension between individual, collective and organisational identities, the school being considered a multicultural organisation (Canen and Canen, 2005), was present in the construction of those guidelines.

That dimension has to do with what Bekerman *et al.* (2009) Leonardo (2005) and Hall (2003), among others, call the provisionary, temporary and contingent aspects of identity construction, focusing the interplay of those levels of identities in everyday schooling. Another aspect refers to the types of multicultural projects to be embraced by the school, from liberal, folkloric ones (more limited to the valuing of cultures, beliefs and aspects inherent to collective identities’ cultures and outlooks), to critical, post-colonial perspectives, geared towards the recognition of hybridity and the complexity of the interplay of identity markers, as well as the enhancement of awareness of inequalities and prejudices, so as to challenge them (Canen, 2011).

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of higher education projects geared towards lifelong learning in a social inclusion perspective (Ogunleye, 2014).

That was particularly relevant inasmuch as the process of building multicultural curricular guidelines was an opportunity for the municipal educational actors and those from the higher education institution to experience a lifelong learning environment during the whole process. It should be noted that lifelong learning opportunities should be viewed “as a tool for achieving the social inclusion of people from disadvantaged groups” (Ogunleye, 2014, p.111). That perspective underlined the experience insofar as the curriculum guidelines had a multicultural perspective from the onset.

Based on that, the present paper discusses the main categories and the argument that informed the construction of the guidelines and, afterwards, delineates the steps and some of the main axes that underlined the document produced. The methodology of the study was a design-based research (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012), which has a practical nature similar to the action-research, but in which the presence of a partnership between the researcher and the educational actors involved has been a prerequisite. The study is relevant comparatively in that it may arguably illustrate the challenges and potentials involved in processes that try to translate de-essentialisation of identities into curricular proposals, both from epistemological, and political outlooks.

Theoretical framework, methodology and background to the study: designing curriculum in a multicultural perspective

From the end of the 1990s onwards, the Brazilian government has presented national moves towards curriculum guidelines and large scale assessment, in response to a general trend of large scale control and measurement of educational quality. However, even though acknowledging the presence of those intentions, it should be noted that those moves have had impacts in processes of discussions and rethinking of curriculum, such as the need for it to take into account cultural, racial and ethnic Brazilian diversity. Brazilian municipalities were asked to incorporate those principles and create their own curriculum designs, taking into account their local cultures, needs and perceived curricular emphases. In that sense, higher education scholars have been invited to help local authorities produce those guidelines, through a collective endeavour involving municipal/local teachers, school administrators and other educational actors’ representatives.

In that context, the present study was undertaken from 2011 to 2012 geared towards producing local municipal guidelines underlined by multicultural, social inclusion concerns, so as to incorporate equity and minority education perspectives. For ethical reasons, the name of the municipality and the actors involved will be kept anonymous.

Challenges involved in the construction of the mentioned local curricular guidelines have touched directly on multicultural tensions, among which are: (i) the very idea of

the possibility of the construction of a multicultural, transformational curriculum design; (ii) the kind of research methodology that could be coherent with the multicultural, transformational perspective and actively involve educational actors in a partnership that could legitimize the whole process; and (iii) the main axes to support the curriculum design narrative, so that the tensions between unity and cultural sustainability should be dealt with in a way as to challenge homogeneity and essentialisation of identities.

Concerning the first mentioned tension, Ball (2012) argues that educational researchers should move away from research designed as mere demonstrations of knowledge towards what she calls “generative research” – *“the one that has the power to close the knowing-doing gap in education, research that is designed to inform others, influence others’ thinking, and inspire others to action”* (Ball, 2012, p. 283). Similarly, authors such as Grimmett & Halvorson (2010) posit that whilst curriculum inquiry scholarship has been strong in deconstructing curriculum as an institutional text, it has been less successful in reconstructing it as a set of transformational discourses. The referred authors claim that even though critical approaches to curriculum thinking have been pivotal in problematising issues of race, gender, cultural diversity, power relations and voice in the analysis of curriculum perspectives, curriculum design still functions in practice along technical rational lines. The referred authors have therefore urged researchers to take into account that *“the two aspects of curriculum understanding and curriculum creation must co-evolve if the power of re-conceptualist curriculum is to pervade the life-world of learning”*(p. 142). Such a realisation has led the present research to be carried out, so that an attempt to respond to the challenges of constructing transformational curricular guidelines should be faced.

The second tension is a methodological one, directly linked to the fact that the construction of a multicultural curriculum should arguably be a process in which researchers and school actors should be involved as partners. In order to do so, the methodology that underpinned the study was developed in the lines of design-based research (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012), which has a practical nature similar to the action-research, but in which the presence of a partnership between the researcher and the educational actors involved has been a prerequisite. It should be noted, however, that Elbaz-Luwisch (2010) calls attention to the pitfalls of qualitative research methodologies that involve partnership between researchers and school actors, among which: teachers lead busy and complex lives and participation in research may not be perceived as serving their purposes; in different settings, researchers may be more or less welcome in schools, and more or less able to form productive research relationships. Whilst those factors were present in the development of the present study, it should be pointed out that others linked to political challenges could also be pinpointed, particularly in a context in which school actors seem to be wary of perceived outside political initiatives that may interfere in their work.

In order to carry on the research, those mentioned factors were minimised in that some strategies had been employed since the beginning, namely: the researcher had been approached by a municipal committee of teachers, who were perceived as legitimate representatives of the municipal teaching work force rather than voices inspired by “hidden political agendas”; and the joint dialogic movement through which the researcher and the educational actors built the curricular guidelines. The dynamics of the design-based research was mainly based on scheduled meetings between the researcher and the committee, as well as talks to representatives of teachers, school directors and school actors, many with the presence of local authorities’ representatives. Also, on line and other virtual contacts were central, providing an ongoing exchange of ideas concerning drafts and opinions related to the document being produced then. Those data were both used for the action undertaken and as evidence for the data analysis inherent to the process of research.

The third tension referred to the content of the municipal guidelines themselves, in terms of the multicultural perspective to underlie it. In fact, from the outset, the idea was that the construction of the local municipal guidelines should represent an opportunity in which all should grow in their understanding of diversity in the road towards contributing to a more inclusive, equitable and supportive learning environment. It was understood that those guidelines should be inspired by a view of schools as multicultural organisations (Canen & Canen, 2005). It was stressed that the construction of municipal local curricular guidelines had to involve a collective effort so that researcher and local educational actors acted like partners and politically legitimised the whole process, in coherence with the multicultural, de-colonised perspective embraced by the study. In fact, Sleeter (2010) suggests that “to decolonise curriculum is to critically examine the knowledge and its relationship to power, recentering knowledge in the intellectual histories of [marginalised groups, among which] indigenous people”, [as well as] ... “theorising the histories and experiences of nontribal, detribalised, and mixed-blood peoples” (p. 194). At the same time, it was clear that such a process was part of a lifelong learning project in which all participants should grow in understanding and acting towards improving social inclusion (Ogunleye, 2014) and multicultural sensitivities.

Identity was a key category to the municipal guidelines, so that the multicultural perspective would go beyond a mere celebration of cultures and indeed allow for the interrogation of racism and the challenge of essentialised identity construction (Bekerman *et al.*, 2009; Leonardo, 2005; Hall, 2003; Kymlicka, 2004; Canen and Peters, 2005; Canen and Canen, 2005; Canen, 2011). Workshops and sensitising meetings led to municipal school actors not only recognising cultural diversity in the municipality, but also to pinpoint issues related to discrimination and low performance of groups of pupils, leading them to embrace a multicultural approach and indeed suggest

ways in which the curriculum could help build transformational identities. That way, a set of positive expectations had been made and the research design based research could take place, resulting in a curriculum design to be commented next.

Data, findings and discussion: translating multicultural concerns into a municipal curriculum design

Once the research was agreed upon, the movement to translate ideas into curriculum design was set in motion, through the meetings and agenda addressed in the last section. It should be pointed out that the third tension referred before has pervaded curriculum designing as it refers to the challenge of addressing the tensions between homogenised, essentialised approaches to identity construction and the valuing of cultural sustainability and cultural diversity.

As mentioned in the introduction of the present paper, a multicultural perspective informed the process of the construction of those guidelines, based on a critical post-colonial lens that in addition to valuing local cultures and challenging racisms and discriminations, should also provide the sense of the provisional, transitional and hybrid nature of identity construction, so as to de-essentialise it (Banks, 2004; Bekerman, *Et. Al.*, 2009; Canen, 2011; Canen & Canen, 2005; Canen & Peters, 2005; Hall, 2003; Peters, 2005; Silva, 2002).

That way, students and teachers should perceive themselves as co-responsible for supporting identity construction that fosters their potential and go beyond essentialised dichotomic approaches that separate “I” and “the other”. That aspect is interestingly addressed by Robinson & Espelage (2012), who called attention to the need for the school climate to be supportive of hybridity and to plural identity construction processes. They illustrate the effects of the lack of such a perspective in schools in which bisexual youth experienced a “double discrimination” (p. 315) from both their heterosexual and lesbian/gay peers, therefore urging schools and researchers to look and value the diversity within broad categories of collective identities (in their case, that of LGBTQ).

Also, it is important to bear in mind that “the international, the regional, and the local each has special features but each shares a complex interrelationship that is framed by ‘cultural hybridity’”(Shotte, 2014). Such a complex articulation, which the mentioned author calls a “third space”, is crucial for the construction of local curricular guidelines, which should arguably equip future generations with international, national and local awareness, so that they can represent educational agents of change and advancement.

Based on that, as mentioned before, the meetings and workshops were geared towards the discussion of case studies, texts, and ideas generated from school actors, in

dialogue with the multicultural approach. Principles were presented by them that were considered key to underlie the municipal guidelines, among which were:

to promote diversity of knowledges, dialogues and coherence of school actions with those; to promote teacher continuing education in a way as to respect teachers' identities and those of the schools; to strengthen teachers, students and other school actors in their citizenship processes and identity construction; to foster a global, national and local perspectives to curriculum development, so as to respect diversity but also to help prepare students to the world of the market; to develop a differentiated perspective that values inclusion, cultural diversity and local municipal cultures; to respect and value the various languages, learning styles and family arrangements in school and teaching activities (from the workshops in the municipality, 2011).

From those, a document was produced in which general curriculum guidelines were issued, which consisted of: an introduction, in which cultural diversity of the municipality was acknowledged and a cursory view of its history, as well as the rationale and the process of the construction of the guidelines were presented; a second part, in which the interplay between global and local perspectives (Shott, 2014), as well as between provisional individual, collective and institutional identities was discussed; a third section, in which a multiculturally oriented set of ideas and principles was presented that should underlie future curriculum developments in the various disciplines, areas and syllabuses; a fourth and last part, containing some conclusions and suggestions as ways ahead for the ongoing assessment and development of those municipal curriculum guidelines.

Focusing on the third part, it is important to note that a format was agreed in which those multiculturally oriented ideas discussed in the previous sections should be translated in a set of simple sentences, similar to a set of competencies, intended to provide the several school actors with a basis upon which to propose future discipline-based year programs that incorporated multicultural concerns in their contents and methodologies. Besides those above mentioned statements, which were considered crucial for the curriculum design, the following statements were collectively produced as well. They further illustrate what came to be named by the group the "integrative multicultural curricular dimensions", which were the basis of the municipal curriculum design:

value cultural diversity and sustainability; proactively and reactively work towards challenging discriminations; value global, national and municipal assets and cultures, so as to promote individual and collective growth; critically and autonomously relate to knowledge building; have a clear and integrated vision of curriculum contents and knowledges; perceive ethical implications of attitudes

in everyday schooling; understand knowledge as culturally produced and located. (from the final municipal curricular guidelines, 2012).

It is interesting to note that teachers and other school actors were asked to think about topics in their school programmes so as to suggest ways in which those “integrative multicultural curricular dimensions” should imbue them. Some of those suggestions were incorporated in the last section of the document, so as to foster teachers and school actors to further develop documents in which the construction of specific content oriented curricular designs should be linked to the mentioned integrative dimensions. Some of the suggestions are presented below, to illustrate the point:

We teachers of Social Sciences would link a topic named “nature and society: the organisation of groups and their ways of working and living” to the integrative multicultural curriculum dimensions of ‘value cultural diversity and sustainability; proactively and reactively work towards challenging discriminations’ by highlighting that in groups all should respect personal, gender, ethnicity and other characteristics for life enhancement. As relevant targets of the program, we would write that students should identify the many roles they undertook in group life, focusing on the many layers of their identities inside and outside the institutions. Also, we could get another topic related to “body language”, by reinforcing the knowledge of different dance styles, and therefore link it to another integrative multicultural curriculum dimension—that of ‘valuing global, national and municipal assets and cultures, so as to promote individual and collective growth’ (from a workshop with the municipal teachers and other school actors, 2012).

In Maths, we, Maths teachers, would link our contents to the integrative multicultural dimensions in the following way: for example, when talking about percentage, we could ask students to identify the tolls of adult illiteracy both in Brazil and in our municipality. We would be linking that specific Maths topic to the integrative multicultural dimensions related to ‘strengthen teachers, students and other school actors in their citizenship processes and identity construction; to develop a differentiated perspective that values inclusion, cultural diversity and local municipal cultures’. Concerning Finance Education, we could discuss how to deal with money, how to face market illusions that lead to over consumption of goods, we could discuss global money transactions and relate them to the municipality and to their own lives, therefore linking those specific topics to the integrative multicultural dimensions related to ‘foster a global, national and local perspectives to curriculum development, so as to respect diversity but also to help prepare students to the world of the market’ (from a workshop with the municipal teachers and other school actors, 2012).

At this point, it also is interesting to note the opinions gathered from municipal schools' representatives and administrators concerning the whole process, as gleaned from the evaluative questionnaires at the end of the project, some of which can be illustrated below:

To think about a curricular proposal that values diversity and democratisation of education (as this one we are building together) is to view education as full of hope—hope that is accompanied by qualities and virtues such as the respect to the others, tolerance, humility, the taste for happiness, for life, the refusal to fatalism and the openness to justice. That kind of education is against the banking education criticised by Paulo Freire.

The process of the construction of the guidelines was a very positive one, because it proposed the creation of curriculum with the participation of those that are part of the municipal educational scenario. We believe the proposal should be accompanied by initiatives that could make the municipal communities of the schools have more access to cultural events through municipal projects directly involving the schools.

As can be noted, the impact of the discussions, coupled with the perceived need to improve curriculum led to the construction of integrative curricular dimensions imbued by the need to incorporate identity construction in a multicultural, non discriminatory way, as well as to try and organise teaching that should likely promote a “glocal” (global and local) understanding of knowledge and identity construction, in a framework similar to that proposed by Shotte (2014), when referring to the linkage among international, regional and local features in education.

As the vignettes show, a sense of cultural diversity in dialogue with hegemonic cultural values sometimes seemed to reinforce a certain idea of local communities' “cultural deficit”, as opposed to cultural sustainability and the valuing of cultural plurality. However, as the result of the process was the successful construction of municipal curricular guidelines that value diversity, hopefully that should be the first of many future steps that should be taken so that statements of intents should actually be translated into teaching practices and a school climate open to diversity and to social inclusion.

Conclusions

The present study drew on a higher education lifelong learning project geared towards the construction of curricular guidelines in a municipality in Brazil, imbued by values of social inclusion, cultural diversity, and the challenge of racism and stereotypes. Three challenges were pinpointed and addressed in the process, namely: the legitimacy of the very idea of the construction of guidelines, engendered by a sense that curriculum creation should be fostered side by side with curriculum inquiry; a methodological ap-

proach that should be coherent with multicultural concerns, which was successfully undertaken through a design research based approach that actively involved school actors in the curricular guidelines construction; and a multicultural, de-essentialised and de-colonised curriculum perspective, which was faced through the insertion of integrative curricular themes and dimensions that could reflect those concerns, as well as try and articulate international, national and local perspectives (Shotte, 2014), and embed school curricular contents and methodologies.

It is noteworthy that the production of those municipal curricular guidelines geared towards all municipal schools with a multicultural, transformative perspective were approved, after all the exchanges and dialogues undertaken during the whole process. Considering the difficulties pointed out by authors such as Robinson & Espelage (2012) concerning the need to take into account hybridity of identities in curriculum design, as well as those highlighted by Elbaz-Luwisch (2010) relative to the challenges in motivating school actors to participate in those collective movements, that relative success cannot be underestimated. They represented an attempt towards producing generative research (Ball, 2012), by going some steps further into moving beyond ‘curriculum understanding towards curriculum creation’ (Grimmett & Halvorson, 2010), with all the difficulties and drawbacks of such a move.

However, the extent to which those integrative multicultural curricular dimensions should indeed provide a decolonising, non-essentialised approach to identity construction (Bekerman, *et. Al.*, 2009; Sleeter, 2010), as well as represent a lifelong learning experience towards social inclusion (Ogunleye, 2014) and promote a collective movement towards understanding school as a multicultural organisation (Canen & Canen, 2005) should probably depend on the future actions to be taken in that municipality. It is well recognised that curriculum design represents a set of statements of intent, which should come to life in school actors’ construction of their course and lesson plans, as well as in their enactments of those intentions in real classroom situations. Hopefully the initial actions that resulted in the referred municipal guidelines should represent starters and stepping stones towards that goal.

Correspondence

Professor Ana Ivenicki
Department of Educational Studies
Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ)
Contact Address: R. Pereira da Silva, 251 bloco 1, apt. 103
Laranjeiras, 22221-140 Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil
Email: aivenicki@gmail.com
Tel/Fax: (+55 21) 22056114

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