Using action research in curriculum development in a fully-controlled educational context: The case of Greece

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Abstract
The main aim of this paper is to illustrate the process through which curriculum development utilizing critical action research can contribute in the democratization in education. So it focuses on the potential of the interaction between teachers and students through developing cooperative and participatory practices in the context of conducting action research. All the specific examples presented in this paper are derived from the Greek educational system which is fully-controlled and highly-centralised. This choice makes the argument presented in the paper stronger: even in our times when in most western countries the neo-liberal policies in education are dominant and impose homogenisation, centralisation, austere accountability, and the disempowerment of teachers, there is still room for freedom, where teachers and students can interact, reflect and judge in the classroom, where the real curriculum can be developed. And –as we try to show in the paper- critical action research can suggest interesting processes in this prospect.

Keywords: critical action research, curriculum development, reflection, cooperation, participation, classroom interaction.

Introduction
In a world of dominant neo-liberal policies and practices, the demand for democratisation in education is very pertinent. The role of the curriculum is crucial in meeting this demand, because of its political nature. In this paper, we attempt to illustrate, using Greece as an example, how curriculum development utilising critical action research can contribute in this direction, and also to address some of the problems encountered in curriculum development, both in theory and in practice. Specifically, the paper focuses on the potential of the interaction between teachers and students through developing cooperative and participatory practices in the context of conducting action research.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first part presents the theoretical and political framework of curriculum development worldwide, highlighting the high relevance of the demand for democratisation in education in a world of dominant neo-liberal policies. The second part draws on the interpretative tools of curriculum sociology, particularly the theory of B. Bernstein, attempting a brief historical overview of Greek curricula, focused on their development framework and the historical context of their creation. This overview, along with the
international context, both theory and practice, that is, in terms of not only curriculum studies and theory but also educational policy and curriculum development practice, can help us investigate the practice of curriculum development in Greece, as well as its theoretical framework. The third part proposes curriculum development practices that utilise educational action research, presenting specific examples from Greek reality. In conclusion, the paper discusses the conditions for utilising action research in curriculum development.

1. Neo-liberal policies in Europe: A context of control

In most western countries, contemporary educational policy has shaped a centralised institutional framework, seeking total control of the educational process. Despite any alternatives that have emerged in the academic, scientific, and educational field after interpretative, critical and postmodern research, education seems to revert to the “effective” modern axioms of homogeneity, standardisation, efficiency and rational control of the finished product. This leads to processes that diminish the role both of teachers (Day & Gu, 2010, pp. 13-15) and of students (Rudduck, 2007, pp. 587-590), who are depersonified and treated as members of an undifferentiated mass, with reduced opportunities to engage in autonomous action (Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996).

In this perspective of control, a crucial role is played by contemporary curricula, their central design, and the imposed conditions of their development, in terms of how these are organised, what kind of knowledge they legitimise, and the imposed processes for managing this knowledge. This is obviously a closed, and therefore easy to control, centralised design. Such closed curricula, that is teacher-proof curricula (Eryaman & Riedler, 2010, pp. 864-865), are imposed as finished products; not only do they define the context of educational action, but they seek to prescribe the educational process in all its aspects, following a modernist positivist logic. They have the form of a prescription, but are endowed with scientific validity and a particularly progressive and attractive discourse.

So, although theoretically we seem to understand its complexity better than ever before (Pinar et al, 1995, pp. 3-10), the curriculum is still presented, following the prescriptions of modernist instrumental rationality, as something given and non-negotiable, as an undeniable unity, a procedural constant, imposed on the basis of a specific prescribed educational plan. In this context, the curriculum is a means of imposing a specific educational policy, which emanates from the top of the hierarchy, excluding a significant number of voices from institutional decision making. And the imposed standardisation of the educational process seeks to marginalise these voices within the school as well (Apple, 1990, p. 378).

Educational evaluation, whether indirect, through any kind of exam, or direct and external, as accountability, controls the results, as a final product, comparing it with the centrally imposed model, which has been predetermined based on non-educational needs (Biesta, 2008). Apart from the indirect control of the educational process through the exams-centred system, the need for explicit external control appears more and more imperative. The efforts for full control of the curriculum through top down determination are apparently complemented by final assessment through external evaluation. The choice of this final
assessment, conducted outside the educational process, also requires the predetermination of educational activities that can lead to measurable results; non-pedagogical activities, mechanistically developed with a direct and explicit orientation of meeting predetermined objectives.

Obviously, these efforts are centred on Tyler’s theoretical principles and curriculum design and development model, introduced in 1949 to meet the specific needs of the American society in a particular situation, quite different than today (Malewski, 2010, p.11). After several decades, and specifically after major redefinitions of scientific thought and the subsequent reorganisation of both its theoretical and research orientation, and after the implementation of several alternatives, this specific linear, centralised and objective-centred curriculum development model is still dominant (Klein, 2009, p. 119). According to Autio (2003, p. 305), it has even been turned into an international/global model, a common reference point, essentially a global curriculum ideology, by educational policy makers.

It is widely agreed that, despite various alternative approaches, educational policy in most western countries is reverting to its traditional orientation of control, though in a different way (Autio, 2003, p. 305). The so-called restoration of conservative education policy, the emergence of neoliberal discourse, and conservative political practices (Malewski, 2010, p. 9; Smith, 2003, pp. 35-38), have restored the simplistic implementation of fixed measurable indicators, instrumentalisation and a growing emphasis on management (Gewirtz, 2001).

In an era of globalised science, knowledge and education policy, both curriculum studies and curriculum development and implementation practices, at least at education policy level, are becoming increasingly similar throughout the world (Anderson-Levitt, 2008, p. 363) despite ostensible differences1.

In most countries, it is presented as imperative to ground the educational process on regulatory texts, produced top-down, away from the classroom, and promoting an extremely technocratic management of knowledge. In the context of today’s globalised market, “curriculum becomes content knowledge organised as necessary to help students compete locally, nationally and globally, not inquiry into the course of study, self-understanding, and educational encounter” (Malewski, 2010, p. 10). On the other hand, the curriculum is indirectly determined by forms of accountability that focus on the final product, which is assessed according to how well it meets the requirements of the predetermined regulatory framework (Biesta, 2013, p. 690).

Theorists call this phenomenon curriculum globalisation, entailing the homogenisation of curriculum policy (Clarence, 2011). In reality, globalisation “is a process of convergence of purposes that use a common vocabulary about curriculum reforms due to the centrality of knowledge and the fostering of national identity, which is more and more defined by transnational agendas” (Pacheco, 2012, p. 12). And this increasingly common global perspective, is due either to advanced technology or to cultural and neo-colonial enforcement practices, and entails the dominance of the choices of wealthy and powerful nations and multinational organisations (Anderson-Levitt, 2008, p. 350).

In many countries today, this conservative version, which has been expressed and masked in various ways since re-appearing in the 1980s, as back
to basics or to traditional values and morals, or as a revival of western tradition and patriotism, draws on the romantic appreciation of the past, when actual knowledge and moral and national education were essential (Apple, 2006, p. 63). It is often presented as an attempt to upgrade the quality of education, which will enable the regeneration of nations, their prevalence in global competition, and also the development of all children (Zhang, 2013, p. 460). In terms of educational policy, however, this approach requires a standardised national curriculum, the return to strict accountability criteria through national exams, the monocultural education and the policy of assimilating every difference.

However, curriculum academics seemed to adopt theoretical orientations, especially in the period after the “reconceptualisation”² (Pinar et al., 1995) and the various discourses that were gradually established. The study of implemented curricula was regarded as bureaucratic and was not a priority for academics (Grimmett & Halvorson, 2010, p. 241), as it was replaced by a more abstract intellectual quest and scientific interest in the curriculum in general (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 64). It is obvious that academics distanced themselves from the reality of the educational process, thus increasing the distance between theorists and educational policy-makers, or even teachers themselves (Young, 2013, p. 105). So, in terms of policy, on the one hand there are the curricula, which are presented as fixed, specific and non-negotiable attitudes towards knowledge, and on the other hand there is “a marginalised curriculum theory which offers critiques of the interests involved in existing curricula, but no alternatives” (Young, 2003, p. 554).

Academics have been criticised in various ways for distancing themselves from school practice and focusing on theoretical investigations (Wraga, 1999). Grimmett and Halvorson (2010, p. 242) support that academics, through reconceptualisation, address the curriculum as a text, without studying its effects on educational practice: “Despite the power of curriculum re-conceptualist theorising, curriculum design still functions in practice along technical rational lines; moreover, by stopping at a mere declaration of design as moribund, the Pinar et al. consolidated re-conceptualist movement essentially forfeited an opportunity to re-conceptualise the process whereby curriculum comes into being”. That is, they claim that the reconceptualisation process did not attempt to reconceptualise the process of curriculum production and development. Yet in this way, the study of the curriculum does not provide a theoretical framework for developing a non-technocratic curriculum, nor does it provide the theoretical foundations for developing alternative methods of approaching it in the school. Behar-Horenstein, Amatea and Sherrard (1999, p. 4) add that we “must begin to move away from esoteric conversation and address the practical concerns of the teachers and students”, placing emphasis on the neglected school aspects of the curriculum. Moreover, several advocates of Critical Pedagogy, for whom the curriculum is political issue (Apple, 2010, p. 4), argued that theoretical research based on postmodernist principles paved the way for the – now dominant – tendency for neo-liberal restoration in education (Apple, 1993)³.

In fact, the exclusive focus on critically understanding the curriculum, in the context of its multiple readings as a text according to different scientific approaches, implicitly restricts the utilisation of research in education in a framework of interactive communication between research and education,
university and school, curriculum theory and educational practice. The contribution of curriculum studies to the interdisciplinary field of pedagogy is considerably limited. There seems to be a divergence between the discourse produced on education and the discourse created in education (Reynolds & Weber, 2004, p. 1), reinforcing the conflict and dichotomy between theory and practice, that had been dominant for years. This dichotomy renders educational practice defenceless to any political and economic threats (Huebner, 1999, p. 235; Pacheco, 2012, p. 4; Young, 2003, p. 554) and leads theory away from schools, since it enjoys neither feedback from nor a dialectical relationship with practice.

2. The curriculum development process: The case of Greece

2.a. Research theoretical framework

In an effort to approach Greek curricula theoretically, socially and politically contextualised (Cornbleth, 1991), this part studies and analyses them as official texts bearing in mind the historical context in which they were produced. This may enable us to approach them taking into account the emerging international context described above. At the same time, investigating the pedagogical and theoretical framework and its relation to the process of curriculum development in schools, we focus on the curriculum discourse developed in universities, teacher education programmes and also books and articles published in Greek.

In order to investigate the context of curriculum development, we draw on sociology of curriculum and focus on issues that concern the selection and production of worthwhile knowledge (Young, 1971), its recontextualisation and its transformation into curriculum pedagogic discourse, a form amenable to pedagogic transmission (Bernstein, 1975). Regarding ‘pure’, ‘general’ and ‘academic’ knowledge produced by universities (Young, 1971), that is by academic disciplines: To which extent is it presented as the only valid version of knowledge, even though it represents only a specific view of ‘reality’? By which means and channels does it become school knowledge in the school subjects and is it implemented and evaluated in pedagogic practice4?

In terms of school knowledge and its control by social relations, we draw on Bernstein’s theory of the pedagogic device, particularly the classification process as “the means by which power relations are transformed into specialised discourses” (Bernstein, 2000, p. xvii) and the framing process as “the means whereby principles of control are transformed into specialised regulations of interactional discursive practices (pedagogic relations) which attempt to relay a given distribution of power” (Bernstein, 2000, p. xvii). The concept of framing in particular is used to refer to: a) the strength of boundaries between what may and what may be not be transmitted in educational practice (Walford, 1995, p. 192) and b) “the degree of control teacher and pupil poses over the section, organisation, pacing and timing of knowledge transmitted and received in the pedagogical relationship” (Bernstein, 1971, p. 50). As a result of variations in classification and framing, Bernstein distinguished between two different types of curricula, open and closed.

Lastly, regarding pedagogic recontextualisation, conducted “by pedagogues in school and colleges and departments of education, specialised
journals and private research foundations” (Bernstein, 1995, p. 33) and its relation to official recontextualisation, “created and dominated by the state and its selected agents and ministries” (Bernstein, 1995, p. 33), we study the current situation of curriculum studies in Greece and its impact on the educational system and the official curriculum development process.

2.b. The curriculum development process in the Greek educational system

The centralised and bureaucratic Greek educational system has been operating since the founding of the modern Greek state (1832) on the basis of a strictly predetermined and hierarchically organised framework (Gotovos et al. 1996, p. 95; Kazamias & Kassotakis 1995, pp. 127-128), meeting not only educational but also ideological-political and national needs (Foteinos, 2009; Grollios, 2006). The system’s centralisation and national orientation, which aimed at constructing and establishing a Greek national identity and preserving the Greek Orthodox culture, led to excessive protectionism, striving for total control of the educational process, expressed in various ways: the institution of inspectors, strictly fixed modules, exam-centred teaching, etc.

Any educational reforms, organised top-down with the approval of a group of experts, failed to limit this centralisation. When the need to create curricula emerged, it was natural, in this context, to choose the curriculum model that allows for direct control over the educational process. So, since the mid-1960s and particularly after the fall of the dictatorship in 1974, in an attempt to modernise teaching, initially lists of contents were composed, encouraging (academic) subject-matter transmission from teacher to pupils, followed by official curriculum texts, comprising aims and prescribed objectives, content, methodology and evaluation in Tylerian terms. Thus the teacher-proof curriculum model was adopted. So, closed curricula were designed, supported by: a) fixed timetables offering no opportunity for selection to either teachers or students, b) specific Teaching Instructions, and c) a single textbook, completely controlled by the state, in a state textbook monopoly policy.

This curricular strategy, presupposing strong framing in curriculum development and educational practice, assigned to experts, administrators and academics the selection of worthwhile knowledge and its transformation to school knowledge in the field of official recontextualisation. Thus the knowledge chosen for schools is scientific knowledge, categorised into discrete subject matters according to the respective disciplines. For this reason, curriculum design was not assigned to pedagogues, or teaching or curriculum experts, but to academics—experts of the subject-matters, who could focus on the selection of the material not on the mode of transmission. School knowledge, as the recontextualisation of ‘pure and academic’ scientific knowledge thus became valid and neutral, in a framework of positivism, indirectly concealing the ideological and political processes of selection and recontextualisation. In this way, value systems reflecting dominant national and political discourses, were reproduced and maintained, creating school dominant culture.

Numerous studies demonstrate that the selection of knowledge in Greek education creates specific national discourses, indirectly serving ideological interests. For instance, the History curriculum deliberately conceals the frequently
submissive attitude of Greeks during the Greek national revolution of 1821 (Pizanias, 2003, p. 33) or the multicultural nature of Greek Antiquity, or even the multinational character of the Byzantine Empire (Fragoudaki, 1997, p. 146). Lastly, since the founding of the modern Greek state, Greek curricula have been tapping into the ideologeme of post-Byzantine civilisation, “which linked Byzantium to the new Greek state, bypassing the irregularity of the Ottoman period” (Kyrtatas, 2000, p. 260), so as to construct a perennial almost pure Greek identity.

Apart from the academia, this adherence to centralised, academic, closed curricula (Flouris & Passias, 2004, p. 131) is also noted in the 1996 OECD report, stating that:

- Greek curriculum policy is mainly defined by the adherence to schoolbooks and the fact that both curriculum and schoolbooks are centrally created and published. In such a system, there is no place for school-based curriculum development, curriculum adaptation to local needs or the needs for specific client groups, or educator initiative. This situation serves as a great disincentive for innovation. (p. 40).

In a recent evaluation report, the Greek Pedagogical Institute points out:

- The weaknesses of curricula designed up to 1997 can be summed up as follows: vague and unclear goal-setting, rote learning of informational knowledge, strict determination of the syllabus content, inflexible teaching planning, limited potential for educator initiatives.

Between 1997-2003, the response to this criticism was an attempt to gradually endow curricula with more flexibility, so that learning would not be viewed as knowledge accumulation but as creative nurturing of ways to master multiperspectival knowledge through participatory and experiential processes. In fact, with the 2003 Cross-Thematic Curriculum Framework and the compulsory education curricula (Official Government Gazette, issue dated 13 March 2003), the system adopted an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge, attempting to link subject matters to each other, in an effort to produce curricula with weak classification. In terms of policy, these curricula aimed to ensure the coherence of syllabi across subject matters, eliminate knowledge fragmentation and create a framework of teachers’ autonomy.

Yet the resulting development framework actually reverted this orientation, confirming that this progressive and overt discourse is dominant only in government rhetoric but marginalised in educational practice. The determination of specific processes, as well as the syllabus instructions and the description of expected results, force teachers to move within a very limited teaching framework, irrespective of the actual practice of teaching. Indirectly, this is a return to teacher-proof curricula, with strong framing, since new curricula do not provide the necessary conditions that would help teachers actually develop the educational process and allow them to overcome the depersonalisation to which they are forced by the race to cover the entire syllabus and execute predetermined steps in teaching. Similarly, a very strict framework is shaped for students, practically invalidating the methodological suggestions for creativity, inquiry-based learning, development of various skills, shaping of personal opinion, etc.
So the new curricula, despite the methodologically interesting assumptions stated in their preface texts and their open orientation, involve teachers in formalistic processes and technocratic teaching options. In this context, both teachers and students are easily depersonified, as experience, communication and relationships are mechanistically shaped in a framework defined by regulations and measurements. These curricula are in fact closed and rigid, with very clear, explicit or implicit, pre-planned directions, making them technocratic both in planning and in classroom implementation.

As stressed above, this phenomenon is not limited in Greece, but forms part of a wider trend. Although the curricula analysed as institutional texts had varying characteristics, a common trend in many was their tendency to control teachers and their work in school and classroom through instructions, recommendations or suggestions (Filippou, 2014, p. 94).

On the other hand, curriculum studies in Greece follow their own academic path and exclusively theoretical perspectives: publication of books on the curriculum, usually limited to presenting theories and curriculum development models from abroad, translation of books, mostly from English, usually addressing sociological issues or approaching the curriculum from the perspective of critical pedagogy. It should also be noted that few university departments offer courses on curriculum studies. Lastly, only few academics specialised in teaching subject-matters are called by the state to participate in curriculum design, since this field is dominated by academics specialised in the respective subject-matters. This choice of course is not random, but rather reflects the dominance of the technocratic logic described above. It should be mentioned here that in the USA, in the late 1950s, after the Sputnik shock, when many changes were directly imposed, aiming at maximising the effectiveness of the educational system, and academic rigour was established in schools, the control of curriculum design was removed from pedagogy experts and assigned to experts on academic disciplines (Grollios, 2011, pp. 220-224).

This academic framework significantly limits the potential for developing dialogue among academics, so as to create a discourse on curriculum as a discipline and the respective development of curriculum studies, which could generate an independent pedagogic recontextualisation field. Under these circumstances, there is obviously no dialogue between academics and practitioners, although it could help cover the gap between curriculum theory and implementation in schools. Such a dialogue would allow a different correlation between the pedagogic and the official recontextualisation fields, with less state control. Of course certain academics do publish papers on established curricula, usually criticising political and ideological aspects latent in current curricula. In other words, academics display a limited involvement with established curricula and little interest to pursue the curriculum as a discipline in general.

3. Curriculum development through action research in Greece: an alternative approach in a centralised framework

3.a. Using educational action research in curriculum development: promising perspectives
At a time when uncertainty and risk dominate both in science and in society, due to radical changes in terms of knowledge that challenge and destabilise the modernist paradigm, it is no longer possible to keep imposing predetermined teaching processes in absentia of the very communicative interaction in teaching. In a constantly changing environment, aiming at inclusivity, interactivity, and critical evaluation, we must abandon the neo-conservative traditional view of the curriculum as a product (Moore & Young, 2010, p. 46). It is therefore imperative to create decentralised operating conditions that will allow both teachers and students to engage and actively participate in shaping the educational process.

The dimensions added to curriculum development by educational action research, particularly its critical-emancipatory version, can shape such an orientation (McKernan, 1996). By focusing on the teachers’ practical judgement and reflection, and viewing teaching as a process that not only implements but also produces theory, educational action research actually established this alternative approach to curriculum.

As Elliott (1991) says:

I would argue that the widespread emergence of collaborative action research as a teacher-based form of curriculum evaluation and development is a creative response to the growth of technical-rational systems of hierarchical surveillance and control over teachers’ professional practices. Out of the still smouldering embers of the traditional craft culture the phoenix of a collaborative reflective practice arises to offer creative resistance to the hegemony of the technocrat. (p. 56).

In this approach, the curriculum can be designed in a specific educational framework, based on real conditions of teaching and learning, and developed through an active process, in which design, action, and evaluation are not only connected but also form part of the process itself. It is a process in which, under certain conditions, teachers and students can engage in a dialectical search for ideas, values and attitudes that support both the critical approach of constructed realities and new, alternative ways to produce meaning (Doll, 1993, p. 3); a process that accepts conflict and allows both teachers and students to develop the curriculum based on their personal experiences, in the prospect of expanding and enriching it (Katsarou & Tsafos, 2013, p. 235).

Under certain circumstances, curriculum development through action research, whether at school level or as part of a wider project, can reduce the distance between the researcher in charge of policy planning or the expert on curriculum theory on the one hand and the practitioner who implements this curriculum on the other hand. Thus curriculum development is transformed into a process of constant curriculum reshaping, attempted at the school without neglecting or underestimating theory, but in the prospect of dialogue and reflective interaction with practice. For this reason, it contributes decisively to a different kind of control over knowledge, now linked to action, and therefore to the linking of curriculum theory to its development at school level.

With the main objective of improving educational practice in each educational context, action research proposes a ‘bottom up’ process not only for curriculum development and production of curriculum theory through constant trial and review, but also for enhancing the process of teaching and learning,
benefitting both teacher and students. For a research perspective of curriculum development can take account of the students' needs, since not only are their voices heard, but they are also given the opportunity to actively intervene in the shaping of the educational process.

Moreover, the teachers' active participation requires as well as promotes the development of professional skills, such as critical thinking, research approach to teaching and curriculum, creativity, as well as cooperation and decision making skills. This is why it is claimed that this alternative curriculum approach and teachers' professional development are interrelated processes (Elliott, 1991, p. 53).

Thus, we can address significant problems of curriculum development in a neo-liberal and technical-instrumentalistic context. Because in this way teachers and students can tentatively approach the informal curriculum, developed during the interaction between teachers and students, in the course of the educational process (Schubert, 2008, p. 401). For even in the framework of control and predetermined objectives, in a fully exam-centred system, there is room for a more autonomous development of educational practice, essentially informal, which results from the communicative interaction between teachers and students and is defined by their specific ‘theories’ and aspirations. As Nason and Whitty (2007) point out:

Teachers and learners are never 'just' teachers and learners. They are raced, classed, gendered individuals whose particular personal, social and cultural histories and world-views shape and inform their actions in the context of on-going social change. It is through their interactions with each other—conceptualized and played out within broader social, political and educational contexts—that teachers and learners create the lived curriculum (p. 272).

3.b. Alternative curriculum practices: The use of action research in the Greek educational system

Over the last 15 years, alternative curriculum development programmes have been developed in Greece, at the level of school or classroom or network of cooperating teachers. Some indicative examples are mentioned here, chosen because of our personal involvement in them, as we believe that our lived experience allowed us to understand them better and discuss them more meaningfully. Obviously, many more valuable such efforts have been implemented in Greece but are not reported here.

First of all, let's begin with the EU project of Second Chance Schools (SCSs). These are schools for adults who have not completed compulsory education. It is an adult education institution, which started operating in Greece under the provisions of law 2525/1997, as part of an EU programme, which aimed at combating social exclusion. Although the SCS curriculum was designed by specialists (mostly academics), following a top-down model of educational change, the institution was innovative, at least in its pilot phase, that is its first 4 years of operation (2000-2004). The teachers involved were not asked to consider the SCS pilot curriculum as a ready-made product, to be simply put into practice, but to adapt the curriculum to the circumstances of their school and study it productively, in order to be able to understand it and to constantly readjust and improve the innovation parameters. The curricula created for each
school were the results of research, design, reflection and evaluation in a cooperative atmosphere gradually developed in the school. The curriculum designers collaborated with each school’s teachers. In fact, new types of partnerships between academics/experts and teachers and new forms of communication among teachers were developed, in order to overcome the restrictions of the top-down model of educational change. This is why some thought was given to procedures that would support teachers in their reflective course of action, and help them take initiative and responsible action, instead of reacting with passive acceptance and insecurity; such procedures consisted of regular training meetings with the main aim of exchanging opinions among the educators of all SCSs, and organising of internal assessment (Katsarou & Tsafos, 2008).

The teachers seem to realise how they benefit from disengaging themselves from an imposed fixed model and manipulation, to assume part of the responsibility of organising the educational act. The teachers claim that such a practice not only changed their attitude towards the curriculum (Tsafos, 2013), but also gave a new dimension to their professional development, with more conscious choices and a more independent course. They maintain that this practice enabled them to act as researchers, in the prospect of improving the educational process, supporting and empowering them in their developing quest to envision an enhanced alternative practice, as explicitly put by the educator of the following excerpt:

> The secondary education curriculum should have been jointly created by innovative processes and an expanded institutional framework, as has been the case of the European pilot programme on SCSs for the past ten years (Educator of Kallithea SCS, in Tsafos, 2013, p. 51).

An additional example can be drawn from another European Project, entitled ‘Education of foreign and repatriated students’, in which we organised an action research project in different schools in Greece (around 30 schools in total), over the last three school-years (2011-14). The main goal of our project was to achieve curriculum change through practices that would assist participating teachers in each school: a) to create a professional team that gradually shapes a feeling of belonging and develops commitment in joint action and change, b) to read the curriculum critically, c) to investigate their common interests and – more importantly – identify areas for intervention, and d) to reshape the curriculum in a continuum of planning, action, reflection and evaluation (Katsarou & Tsafos, 2013, p. 237). The project was developed revolving around principles as: activating teachers, posing questions on curriculum issues that are taken for granted in schools, particularly in secondary education, providing interaction (between teachers and their colleagues or project facilitator) in the context of intervening on the curriculum implemented in the school, cooperativity and collegiality on the part of teachers, in terms of decision-making and initiatives that could enhance the teaching and learning process. Moreover, the project provided a direct link between the teachers’ teaching interventions and their training. The training courses did not provide instructions and prescriptions, taking the form of experiential learning, discussion of the teachers’ implicit educational theories, and presentation of smart ideas and suggestions to enrich the curriculum.
So the teachers gradually participated in processes that nurtured their tendency to research and enhance their understanding of their students and their views on the implemented curriculum (i.e. they took the initiative to compose a sociogramme of their class, to administer questionnaires to their students, investigating their views on the official teaching process they implemented, based on teacher’s monologue and teaching, as well as on the alternative / experiential approaches they attempted). The experiential methodology of the training often changed their teaching practices: “I sought the experiential involvement of students in the class. I no longer wanted barren didacticism. I thought about how I felt during the training, and I wanted my students to experience the same”. In fact, as they discussed the alternative teaching procedures with their colleagues and facilitator and interpreted data collected from their students (from their work or completed questionnaires), teachers gave abundant feedback on the actions implemented, engaged in reflection and developed theories and new action hypotheses (Katsarou, 2012). This turned teaching into a dynamic process, constantly investigated, challenged and reviewed. Moreover, the teachers started investigating the curriculum so as to review and enrich it with alternative and cooperative activities in the classroom. So they began to view the curriculum not as a rigorous dominant element of the educational process, but as a flexible and malleable means, which they can modify. Though they continued to have reservations about their new role (Perhaps we do not transfer knowledge in a measurable way, and this could hurt our students in the future?) they sought experimentation and felt empowered against the dominance of the curriculum.

Certainly, we should not omit the efforts of individual teachers or schools, apart from major European programmes. For instance, such efforts are made by the teachers of Pilot Experimental Schools, where on the one hand the institutional framework is more flexible, allowing innovation to a certain extent, and on the other hand the relationship with the university is strong.

Let us see such an example in more detail: In a Pilot Experimental Junior High-School, a group of teachers realises that students are obsessed with getting high grades, without any interest in actual knowledge acquisition. The students’ performance is good, but only because high grades are rewarded by their parents. The teachers wondered how to change the implemented curriculum so as to endow their students with real, interval motivation to learn. They assumed that this situation was mostly due to quantitative evaluation (scoring) imposed by the curriculum, since it encourages competition, grade fixation, and emphasis solely on the learning outcome. Thus, they decided to conduct collaborative action research that aimed in transforming the learning processes in the classroom, by systematically intervening in the pupils’ assessment. So the teachers, aided by the academic-researcher, a member of the school Supervisory Committee, and working in small groups, tried some assessment methods that are not abstracted from teaching and learning processes but operate as a necessary supplement to them (peer assessment, self-assessment, pupils’ portfolio assessment). During their intervention, they delegated authority and responsibility to the pupils themselves regarding their assessment, so that they would become self-conscious social actors, actively involved in the learning processes.
During these processes, an intrinsic debate between teachers-researchers was developed, acknowledging the need for innovation and the fact that the system exercises conservative social pressure via the ‘examinational demand’, holding back the social character of the school and its correlation to research and change. It was obvious to all participants that ‘strict curricula’ and ‘time for experimentation’ are contradictory notions. They chose not to be held back by this discovery, but rather to create insights and discuss the need for altering attitudes such as from ‘getting the information’ to ‘getting process knowledge’.

Despite the difficulties met, this intervention brought significant changes to the school. The teachers became more aware and active in a discussion on the impact of social factors in the formulation of any cognitive or learning results. As the teachers themselves confess:

Getting involved in collaborative action research, we find ourselves critically considering the whole organisational, educational and social framework of schooling, passing from the highly typical protocol of “evaluating the results”, to the interpretation and evaluation of diverse factors that formulate the students’ abilities and performance and participating in a procedure that evokes critical insights on our own responsibilities as teachers, on the role of the curriculum and of the curricular choices we reproduce, of the social conditions and of the whole educational framework (Arsenakis, et al., 2014).

Moreover, the students’ meta-cognitive skills and attitudes were increased, as did their awareness of this fact, while they found themselves involved – as they write in their journals – in discussions on “learning how to learn”, at the same time explicitly expressing their relevant views.

A thorough look at the above examples reveals the following common points:

- All these initiatives were realised in a very strictly centralised system (as is the Greek system), with very positive results for participant teachers (at least regarding their awareness of the educational context, the practices they engage in and their capacity to change them) and their schools.
- In all the above programmes, teachers participated actively, taking initiative, and either intervening on a proposed curriculum, open, flexible and receptive to change, reaching them as a working hypothesis, or shaping their own curriculum as a plan under constant review.
- The intervention was shaped by the teachers and the communities they created through their interaction with colleagues and external (usually academic) partners. The latter essentially helped teachers attribute meaning to their experience and construct new knowledge, a process that empowered all participants. And they were able to support this framework of cooperation that was being developed on equal terms, because they functioned as critical partners, adopting the reflective support model (Maynard & Furlong, 1995).
- State intervention was limited, because a European Project or a more flexible framework was being implemented. Additionally, there was a reinforced connection between the school were the curriculum was developed and the university, an institution that is not subject to the
3.c. Possibilities and restrictions. Essential conditions

The initiatives described above as indicative examples constitute attempts of curriculum development through action research. They are significant because they activate school factors that are often silent during curriculum development, namely teachers and students. At the same time, they provide opportunities to study the processes of encouraging and supporting the cooperation between teachers and students, as well as the problems that emerge in such a cooperation and the restrictions that arise either by the institutional framework or by the participants and their own expectations. So, the processes that reveal the voice of teachers and students, also allowing them to approach it critically, may constitute both a significant research aspect and a very interesting educational perspective, as they allow teachers, mostly through weak classification, to develop a curriculum that meets their students’ needs, in the prospect of their gradual development. At the same time, through the reflective and cooperative framework shaped by action research, teachers become involved in reflection on the curriculum and how to reshape it in the school, and also on school knowledge, this contributing to pedagogical field recontextualisation.

Such promising initiatives often encounter several restrictions. We will focus on the restrictions we consider most significant. Several restrictions arise from the national and international educational context, as described above (sections 2 and 3b). These restrictions hamper teachers wishing to innovate, by creating practical difficulties (i.e. the established quantitative assessment of students, through scoring, is contrary to, and actually invalidates, alternative evaluation methods that activate students) and moral dilemmas (If I don’t transfer the knowledge prescribed in the curriculum, will my students fail in their exams?). The tradition created in schools prevents any innovation.

Another factor that hinders the implementation of such initiatives is the difficulty inherent in cooperation, and the lack of cooperation culture in schools. No matter how the cooperation is implemented (i.e. between teachers and researchers or other teachers, or parents, or even students), action research calls for the cooperation of individuals with many and significant differences, often from different social or professional groups. It is easy for a group to take advantage of action research to serve the interests it represents.

Furthermore, many difficulties arise from the disempowerment of teachers, which is even more pronounced today. Teachers socialise expecting to receive knowledge produced by others; they have no confidence in their ability to produce meaning through action (i.e. teaching) and reflection. Chittendon, Charney and Kanevsky observed this phenomenon more than 35 years ago:

Historically teachers have been told that the source of knowledge about learning resides somewhere outside their classrooms, perhaps in curriculum or research labs. Given such conditions, it is not surprising to find some teachers so lacking confidence in their own views that they doubt the legitimacy of their experience
with children when confronted with ‘expert’ evidence that goes against it. Insofar as teachers are unable to look critically at their classrooms, their teaching suffers. It becomes uninteresting and takes on qualities of routine and mindless practice... (1978, p. 58).

The above restrictions create the need to discuss the necessary conditions to ensure quality curriculum development through processes of critical-emancipatory action research. First, we should realise that the centralised educational system generates not only restrictions, but also opportunities, which should be utilised. The democratic rhetoric of neo-liberal curricula legitimises action research initiatives. In action research, participants have to view the definitions of the organisational concepts and categories they develop (i.e. the concept of justice, or cooperation) as constantly open to negotiation, be attentive to the different interpretations attributed to these concepts by others, recognise and respect difference and variety, and be vigilant against complacency and common games of power that can distort the meaning of words (Somekh, 2006, pp. 24-26).

Furthermore, in order to achieve genuine, authentic and durable cooperation, certain conditions need to be met. First of all, relationships have to be democratic, and responsibilities equally shared by all members. All processes must take into account what particularly interests and benefits all involved groups (Gore & Zeichner, 1995, p. 19). The willingness to utilise the thoughts and ideas of other partners, as well as the participation in a learning scaffolding built by the group, can be very helpful. Moreover, it is necessary to nurture an atmosphere of trust and good will (with each group certain that the other group defends its interests), reliability (consistency), honesty (integrity), free access to all collected data for all participants, and understanding and appreciation of the views, experiences, knowledge and skills of each participant. Of course in order to foster this trust, all participants need to devote time and effort (Pine, 2009, pp. 131-135, 154-157).

Action research is a constant struggle of all participants for their empowerment. By engaging in collective processes (in the context of a community that generates safety) that question, challenge, investigate, reflect on and evaluate their practice, teachers are empowered, encouraged to recognise that their action affects other people (including students, parents, and colleagues), and motivates them to study the circumstances of their work, to assume conscious responsibility for enhancing their practices and to claim the ownership of professional knowledge (Pine, 2009, pp. 93-94). Provided that they can participate in these empowering processes as equals, instead of being manipulated by “stronger” partners (administration, academics, etc.), or pursuing their interests (consciously or unconsciously). In other words, this empowerment must be grounded in a commitment to the vision of collective action aiming at social change (Ledwith, 2007).

Conclusion

As results from the discussion above, the use of action research in curriculum development offers promising prospects. It can really bring about changes in school, teachers, and students. It is worth exploring under which
conditions it should be conducted, so that action research can maintain its critical character, rather than become a means of enforcing government policies and new ready-made curricula. We believe that these conditions are explicitly described by Carr and Kemmis (2005) in their attempt to answer the question *How can action research remain critical in postmodern times?*. Their answer derives from a rich and reflective line of thought, utilising postmodern tools to make up for deficiencies of the postmodern framework: Action research should on the one hand preserve the vision of empowering practitioners to reveal the tensions and contradictions between emancipatory educational values and dominant educational policies and practices and on the other hand embrace the postmodern perspective of viewing taken-for-granted assumptions as problematic. In the context of conducting action research, this could mean that not even emancipatory educational values can be legitimised through criteria of normative validity, that is, they cannot be considered a priori accepted by participants. In contrast, emancipatory educational values must emanate from common beliefs and orientations, constructed and/or interpreted through dialogue (Carr & Kemmis, 2005, p. 355).

One has to wonder how these conditions can be met in our globalised world, where education is governed by homogenisation, centralisation, austere accountability, and the deprofessionalisation and disempowerment of teachers. In this bleak educational landscape, there is room for promising prospects; room for freedom, where teachers and students can interact, reflect and judge in the classroom, where the real curriculum can be developed.

On the basis of our results we argue that teachers and students, through co-constructing in-between spaces which build on informal interaction, replace predetermined actions and content with an in-determined position, that is, they create their own spaces of inter-subjective negotiations. Although these spaces can sometimes be characterised as noise or disturbance, they also contain interaction which is shown to have some positive influence for educational outcomes (2010, p. 361).

The university needs to reinforce this area, expanding and reshaping research at the level of both theory/academic and practice/school, in the perspective of linking curriculum studies with curriculum development at schools. However, such a compound orientation requires not only mental processes and cognitive investigations, but also taking initiative and responsibility. This applies to academics and interdisciplinary curriculum experts, who have to understand the problems brought about by their distancing from schools, which allows the dominance of norm both in curriculum development and in shaping educational practice. But it also applies to teachers, who have to understand that the resistance to the executive role prescribed to them does not mean resorting to educational routines, which also reflect dominant educational values, unconsciously adopted.

Problematisation requires reflective processes. Perhaps the understanding of the curriculum as a text will then help schools develop a curriculum that is meaningful to both teachers and students, contributing to the reconceptualisation of the educational process. Moreover, the teachers’ educational intervention will be reconceptualised, not seeking alternative practices, but rather aiming to enrich
the educational act by opening new perspectives. In this context, research orientations, regardless of their starting point, will serve this dialectic.

Notes


2. "The concept of 'reconceptualisation' refers to a paradigm shift during the 1970s in the academic field of U.S. curriculum studies. [...] The field was reconceptualised from a largely bureaucratic and procedural field to a theoretically sophisticated field devoted to understanding curriculum [...] as historical, political, racial, gendered, phenomenological, autobiographical, aesthetic, theological and international" (Pinar, 2010, pp. 735-736).

3. Of course, Pinar reveals the political dimension of the reconceptualisation paradigm, claiming that "Through the reconceptualisation, we continued the political work of the sixties. Many of us wanted to relocate the political to the subjective and the personal. I would say in retrospect we were both political, but at different sides of politics. I would say the political theories were also subjective theories, without realizing it, because they wanted a shift in attitudes and structures and practices, which required different subjectivities. We were both a little overstating the distinction between the subjective and the social, maybe." (Pinar, Interview, 2009, in Pacheco, 2012, p.7).

4. "Formal education knowledge can be considered to be realised 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 as a valid realization of this knowledge" (Bernstein, 1975, p. 85).


6. For instance the belief that group cooperative teaching is time consuming and makes it impossible to cover all the syllabus, or that student evaluation equals to the assessment of their performance or that the Greek civilisation (ancient, Byzantine, and modern) forms a continuum and is qualitatively superior to others.

7. Let us recall the definition of action research by van Rooyen & Gray (1995, p. 89), as an "experiential research process where people are collectively involved on an equal basis in collective action aimed at knowledge development, education, social change and empowerment."

8. As noted by Pinar, a leading figure of the postmodern movement of reconceptualisation: "Where curriculum can be constructed now is in the ‘lived space’ of the classroom, in the lived experience of students and teachers. In such space and in such experience, the knowing teacher and student can find passages from what is given (indeed, mandated) to the what might be, ‘a middle way’ between strict adherence to the facts and to participation in flights of fancy [...]. Passages, middle ways and midpoints can be discussed via the ‘pedagogical content knowledge’ of a self-knowing teacher, a teacher who knows that her or his pedagogical obligation is not to deliver someone else’s mail [...] but, with his or her students, to compose our own correspondence, regarding the knowledge the textbook publishers and district curriculum guidelines have decreed" (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 860).

References


Received: 11 June 2014

Accepted: 05 September 2014