The myth of curriculum impact in Brazilian education

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Abstract
Recent years have seen improvements and contradictions in Brazilian education. Demand for public school access has been supplied in a slow and gradual pace, but the incidence of school failure has increased. This paper analyzes teachers’ perception about the impacts of curriculum contents and of nonaccomplishment of school curriculum on students’ learning. The research reveals that 84% of teachers consider that learning problems faced by students of the 9th grade of Fundamental School in Brazilian public schools are not related to curriculum contents. It was also noted that 90% of teachers believe that such problems are not associated to the nonaccomplishment of curriculum contents. Data of over 130,000 teachers were analyzed in order to identify possible explanations to the relations between curriculum and learning.

Keywords: Curriculum, Learning, Fundamental School, Standardized Assessment for Basic Education

Introduction

Industrial development and increasing nationalism in the early 1930 proposed different functions to education in Brazil, whose schools were starting to consolidate: 1) learning, traditionally recognized as the main school role, which aims at social integration, discipline to labor, political legitimacy, and “leading elites” training; 2) socialization, associated to Brazilian adhesion to the “American model” of education, and noted in Charlot’ studies; 3) social protection, assuring security to people who are in social vulnerability; 4) reproduction of social inequalities, in consonance with Bourdieu’ sociological theory, which describes the school system, theoretically based on social inclusion, as a major promoter of inequality and exclusion.

Brazilian education dates back to its colonization; however it has reached the national agenda only after 1930. Since the National Constitution of 1946, education is a right of every Brazilian citizen. For the next two decades, public teaching faced a burst of expansion, especially in big urban areas, but due to a lack of planning, it was not orderly organized. Even though the National Constitution of 1967 introduced the mandatory teaching to all Brazilians from 7 to 14 years-old, offered free of charge in official schools, the universalization of Fundamental School became a reality in Brazil only in the beginning of the 21st century. Administrative, financial and pedagogical decentralization have been powerful obstacles to its pursuit, along with the long tradition of socioeconomic and cultural inequalities that are still present in Brazil.

Following international patterns, Brazil developed its own Standardized Assessment for Basic Education (SAEB) in the late years of 1980. Its main
objectives were related to monitoring and improving quality of education. Leaving its purposes, methodologies, outcomes and critics aside, SAEB provides a huge collection of students', teachers' and school principals' data every 2 years.

Despite the so-called universalization of Fundamental School in Brazil, high rates of retention, drop-out and age/grade distortion among students, along with low learning indicators, persist in Brazilian education. School failure is a consequence of the educational inclusion of significant amount of population who had no prior access to school and whose cultural experiences were different from those of the individuals who were already attending school. In other words, along with opportunity expansion process, school has incorporated tensions, contradictions and differences that are present in the Brazilian society (Oliveira & Araujo, 2005, p. 8). School system suffers the effects of morphological changes and of all adjacent social changes through a set of pedagogical problems (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2011). Those problems are commonly expressed by exclusion within the school system.

This article tackles learning problems among 9th grade students, through the glimpse of teachers. Our concern is to investigate whether those learning problems are related to curriculum contents and/or to the nonaccomplishment of curriculum contents. The purpose of this paper is not to identify the causes of such problems, but rather to analyze teachers’ data in order to explain their perception on the relations between curriculum and students’ learning. Analyzed data is based on 153.428 teachers’ answers to SAEB’s contextual questionnaires through a quantitative methodological approach.

1. Teachers and curriculum

Young (2014) defines that curriculum comprises what should be taught and what should be learned. Curriculum is also related to study programs and plans, and with the principles that rule the selection of courses at schools and relations among them, assuring social control and determining individual behavior. Curricular decisions necessarily concern teachers, students, knowledge, classroom, as well as experiences and learning environments (Apple, 2010).

According to Moreira (2001), any analysis or discussion about curriculum requires reflections about teachers and their practices. Social construction of knowledge creates the background for the development of school curriculum, from a decontextualization of original knowledge to its recontextualization in schooling universe, without losing its sense and meaning (Bernstein, 2003). Curriculum conception corresponds to pedagogical experiences through which knowledge is constructed and reconstructed by teachers and students. Once teachers assume an active participation in the process of planning and developing such experiences, there is no curriculum development if there would be no teachers’ development and improvement of their practices (Mendéz, 1990).

Teachers constitute a permanent set of specialized agents, whose production is monopolized by the school system. They receive a durable homogeneous training, based on institutional rules and procedures, titles and on the legitimacy of their profession, which contribute to make them very interchangeable. They work with homogenized and homogenizer instruments, which induce them, through the institutional conditions of their own reproduction, to limit their practice to the limits traced by an institution designed to reproduce
the cultural arbitrary (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2011). These ideas are present in the neoliberal role of the efficient and competent teacher, which does not need to be empowered as his participation in the political-pedagogical school planning is not enforced, but has been overloaded with additional tasks and responsibilities, more reports and registrations, higher work intensification and less time to preparation and study (Hypolito, 2010).

Inculcated information and teaching are encoded, homogenized, ritualized, and systematized in the school system, making the educational culture somewhat routinized, determined by the so called “legitimate” culture, derived from the dominant layers of the society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2011). Pedagogical communication requires domain over its codes among the receivers. Once there is an unequal distribution of cultural capital among social classes, which occurs in Brazil, there is also a big gap in attitudes, objectives and strategies toward school, which boosts the reproduction of social inequalities. In this context, sociology of education, and more specifically, sociology of curriculum, currently faces a dilemma: taking into account the social, economic and cultural diversity, and therefore proposing local and particular curriculum solutions to better deal with school failure, taking the risks of communitarianism and social fragmentation; or following the presumptions of a common and unified culture, respecting the equality principle proclaimed in international law and domestic legislation of most countries.

For many decades, Brazilian federative tradition has allowed state education bureaus to develop their own curriculum, which would be the main references to municipal and private schools within that federal unit, observing generic national guidelines (Barretto, 2006). Municipalities also had some autonomy regarding curriculum. LDBEN/1996, an important Brazilian federal law that establishes the guidelines of education, has changed this scenario by accounting national government for the definition of national curriculum parameters for basic education in Brazil (Brasil, 1996). A variety of factors have contributed to this change, e.g. standardization of school books, implementation of teachers’ training programs by the national government, and the development of assessment systems for Brazilian education. Thereby, in Brazil, the trend to unify school curriculum has surpassed any effort for diversification aiming at minimizing social inequalities.

Curriculum has taken a central position in education reforms in Brazil and around the world, which contributes to the misidentification of curricular changes with the education reforms themselves (Lopes, 2004). Besides, curriculum impacts education plans, schooling processes, teachers’ training programs, learning assessment processes, school books and other pedagogical resource selection, education project implementation, introduction of new school technologies etc. (Valle, 2011).

2. Methodology

SAEB aims at providing subsidies to the development of educational policies in order to improve quality in Brazilian education. For reaching this purpose, it is a wide instrument of data gathering as its exams and questionnaires are bi-annually applied to all 5th and 9th grade students of Brazilian
public schools and to a sample of these grades in private schools, besides its scope in other levels of education. As mentioned earlier, teachers also participate on this evaluation by providing data about their education, career, teaching experience, cultural habits, participation in school activities, school environment and atmosphere, pedagogic and methodological approaches, students’ learning and school problems, in a contextual questionnaire provided by SAEB.

This paper aims at investigating the perception of teachers about students' learning problems related to curriculum. Our analysis focuses on two questions that are engaged in this relationship: 1) Q49 of SAEB’s teachers questionnaire, which asks teachers whether students’ learning problems are related to curriculum contents, which sometimes could be considered inadequate to students’ needs; 2) Q50, which asks them whether students’ learning problems are related to the nonaccomplishment of curriculum contents. These questions are the dependent variables of the analysis. This research analyzes teachers' data in order to identify possible explanations to their declared relations between curriculum and learning. Therefore, independent variables are: education (Q4); years of experience as teacher (Q17); years of experience as teacher at that school (Q18); years of experience as teacher of the 9th grade (Q19); number of schools where the teacher currently works (Q21); number of hours of teaching on a weekly basis, except private classes (Q22); percentage of the expected curriculum contents that was accomplished in the assessed grade in 2011 (Q121).

Data consists on the answers of 153,428 teachers, who teach Math and Portuguese to the 9th grade of Fundamental School, a critical grade when considering school failure, to SAEB’s contextual questionnaire in 2011, and has been processed in statistical software SPSS, using descriptive analysis and crosstab.

As 22,120 questionnaires were returned in blank, our analysis counted with answers of 131,308 questionnaires. Most of teachers (60.95%) work at state institutions, 38.88% at municipal schools, and the others at federal premises. The majority of schools they work at are located in urban areas (91%). Women predominate (72%). The majority of teachers is from 30 to 49 years-old (69%); 15% are younger teachers, and 16%, older. Most of them are white (53%) and pardo (35%); other ethnicities (black, Asian, indigenous) and “I do not know” answers account for 12%.

Regarding teachers’ education, as they teach Math and Portuguese, a great amount of them are graduated either in Linguistics-Portuguese (42.92%) and Mathematics (40.5%). Relevant percentages of teachers – 4.2% and 8.81% – are graduated in Pedagogy and other university majors, respectively; and a disturbing amount has completed only upper teachers college (0.74%) and Middle School (2.73%) and 0.1% have not even completed Middle School.

3. Teachers’ perspective on curriculum and students’ learning

The majority of Brazilian public school teachers disagree that learning problems of the students of the 9th grade of Fundamental School are related to curriculum contents (84%), or are associated to the nonaccomplishment of curriculum contents (90%). Even though most of the education reforms propose changes to the school curriculum in order to improve quality in education and
students’ learning, teachers believe that curriculum content and its accomplishment are not responsible for the learning problems that 9th grade students currently face at public schools in Brazil.

This ascertainment is independent of teachers’ education, despite showing more intensity in Linguistics teachers’ answers (the majority of the respondents), as demonstrated in Chart 1.

![Chart 1 – Teachers’ perspective on curriculum and students’ learning vs. teachers’ education](image)

The number of years of experience as teacher – 64.5% have been teaching for 10 years or more – does not influence their perception on the relations between curriculum and learning problems of 9th grade students either, as well as the number of years of experience as teacher at that particular school, where 72% of them work less than 10 years, and the number of years of experience as teacher of the 9th grade, whose majority (56%) teach to such grade for less than 4 years. These evidences are presented in Charts 2, 3 and 4, and they reflect the changes in Brazilian education, where there is an increased demand for upper-level class – 8th and 9th grades, mainly due to the recent inclusion of a great amount of children into the school system and due to school progression policies.
Chart 2 – Teachers’ perspective on curriculum and students’ learning vs. years of experience as teacher

Chart 3 – Teachers’ perspective on curriculum and students’ learning vs. years of experience as teacher at that school
It has been noted that the number of schools where teachers currently work does not impact their opinion about the relation between learning problems and curriculum, considering that 54% of the respondents work at only one school, even though there is a slight variation in the perception of teachers who work at 4 or more schools, as shown in Chart 5.

The number of hours of teaching on a weekly basis, except private classes, has no effect on their perception about the curriculum-learning problems issue, according to information provided in Chart 6. Almost half of the respondents (47%) teach 40 hours or more per week, and 25% have declared to teach over
40 hours weekly, which is irregular according to Brazilian labor law. This confirms the vulnerable situation of teacher profession in Brazil, with low economic and social recognition.

Nevertheless, it was observed that, depending on the percentage of the expected curriculum contents that was accomplished in the 9th grade in 2011, there is variation in the dependent variables pattern. Teachers who declared that less than 40% or between 40% and 60% of the contents were accomplished are more inclined to state that curriculum may be related to students’ learning problems, despite the fact that the majority of teachers in these groups (72% and 77%, respectively) seem to hold on to the belief that this relation does not exist, whereas the general average among all respondents is 85%, as illustrated in Chart 7.
Chart 7 – Teachers’ perspective on curriculum and students’ learning vs. percentage of the expected curriculum contents that was completed 9th grade in 2011

A similar finding is valid for the association between students’ learning problems and the nonaccomplishment of curriculum contents: in average, 90% of teachers tend to decline this relation, while among the respondents who developed less than 40% of the expected content in 2011, and those who declared to have accomplished between 40% and 60% of the contents, the average falls to 78% and 83%, respectively. On the other hand, teachers who have developed more than 80% of the expected content are more likely to deny this relation: 88% do not see any association between curriculum and learning problems and 94% assume that the nonaccomplishment of curriculum contents have no impact on learning problems. Thus, there is a correlation between this independent variable and the two dependent variables: the higher the percentage of expected curriculum contents that was accomplished by teachers, the greater is teachers’ perception that students’ learning problems are not related to curriculum. In spite of the unequal respondents’ distribution – 2% of teachers accomplished less than 40% of expected contents; 14% of the respondents, from 40% to 60%; 49% accomplished between 60% and 80%; and 35% accomplished over 80% of the contents –, it is important to observe that it may be more difficult for teachers to admit the nonaccomplishment of curriculum contents than to declare that over 50% of the contents have been accomplished, because the onus of nonaccomplishment tends to fall upon teachers themselves, whose professional class in Brazil already confronts problems such as low salaries and lack of prestige.

Final considerations

This analysis identified teachers’ perception about the relation between curriculum and learning. Results clearly show that teachers do not associate students’ learning problems to curriculum contents nor to the nonaccomplishment of curriculum contents. This relation (or lack of relationship) can be justified by different phenomena and this paper intended solely to investigate whether teachers’ perception would vary when variables in teachers’ career and teaching experience would also vary. We found uniformity in teachers’ perceptions. This can be explained by a possible internal cohesion in the teachers’ professional class, which tend to defend curriculum contents, as sometimes they participate on curriculum development, and reinforce their accomplishment, whatever it costs (in terms of time and efforts), as their main purpose is to improve students’ learning. Also, they probably agree tacitly (or unconsciously) that their weaknesses, whatever they are (curriculum contents inadequate to students’ needs or nonaccomplishment of curriculum contents, for instance), should not be disclosed, as their professional category already is frequently depreciated.

Therefore, the analysis of teachers’ data did not allow to deeper investigate the possible explanations for the type of relations between curriculum and learning problems perceived by teachers, but corroborates the ascertainment that the learning problems of the students of the 9th grade of Fundamental School in Brazilian public schools are not associated to curriculum or to the nonaccomplishment of expected curriculum contents.
Curricular content is arguably regarded as a cause of students’ learning problems in societies where other problems that can affect the learning process are “under control”. In the Brazilian case, other aspects may have more impact in the learning process, e.g. violence, poverty, school precarious conditions, social and cultural inequalities etc. The following aspects were associated to learning problems by respondents scrutinized in the study: lack of family support (96%), lack of student’s commitment (94%), environment (neighborhood) where student lives (81%), student’s indiscipline at school (73%), family cultural capital (73%), student’s low self-esteem (70%), lack of student’s aptitude and/or ability (47%), teacher’s work overload (41%), teacher’s low salary (38%), lack of physical/pedagogical infrastructure (32%), among others related to student’s intellectual development, unsafe school environment and curriculum contents (curriculum inadequacy and nonaccomplishment were considered by only 16% and 10% of teachers). All these dimensions could be further analyzed considering Brazilian macro context and individual particularities.

One could assume that there is a trend in the teachers’ professional class to conceal its vulnerability while refraining from accountability or responsibility for student learning problems. Recent research indicates that student is the main agent in the learning process. Student mobilization towards learning leads to efficacy in the teaching-learning process, even though many students, particularly those from the more disadvantaged social classes, assume that the teacher is the active person in this process (Charlot & Reis, 2014). Teachers’ conduct has often been blamed for the deadlocks and setbacks of Brazilian education. Like Bourdieu, who perceived the unveiling of the symbolic violence disseminated by school, teachers tend to deposit their hopes in education institutions, denying any negative influence that school might have on the learning process.

Curriculum is an important instrument for reaching learning purposes in education. However, based on the results of this research, the correlation between curriculum and learning is a myth in Brazil, in face of all political efforts towards changes in curriculum as a solution for education. On the contrary, learning problems are more associated to socioeconomic and cultural inequalities, following Bourdieu and Passeron’s perspective, individual characteristics (effort, commitment, self-esteem, indiscipline), teachers’ vulnerabilities (work overload, low salaries), and school resources in Brazil. All these aspects should be considered when one intends to enhance quality in Brazilian education. This also highlights the need to better understand students’ cultural diversity, especially when constructing and implementing policies and politics concerning universalization and democratization of education. Education reforms do not necessarily need to bring up curricular changes, but it is fundamental to comprehend the agents – students and teachers – for whom education policies and politics are driven, and their perceptions about the learning process.

Notes

1. Fundamental School consists of 1st to 9th grades and it is offered by state (25,003 schools, 8,516,086 students), municipal (93,866 schools, 16,154,337 students), federal (45 schools, 24,017 students) and private (22,346 schools, 4,374,841 students) institutions in Brazil (INEP, 2013). Private schools, students and teachers are not considered in the analysis, as this research focus on public education.
2. In 2010 there was still 10% of retention, when several state and municipal educational systems were performing school flow regularization policies (cycle-based schooling, continued progression/promotion and/or learning acceleration programs) in accordance to federal law (Brasil, 1996), and 5% of drop-out among Fundamental School students (IBGE, 2015).

3. High School.

4. Nonresponse or annulled answers to the questions considered as dependent variables in this research have not been considered in the analyses. They correspond, in general, to 3% of all answers.

5. Only those who have not completed High School – 124 teachers – tend to show a different answer pattern.

6. All charts in this paper were developed by the author, based on data by INEP (2011).

7. Even though only 1.4% of the respondents work at 4 or more schools, working in different environments, contexts and realities could allow a comparison between the learning problems and curriculum contents among different schools and though, could enable different perceptions/ reflections.

References


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