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## **The Brazilian National Curriculum for Foreign Languages Revisited Through a Multiculturalism and Peace Studies Approach**

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### 1 Introduction: perspective, relevance and objective of the study

This study emerged from a broader research completed during my Masters Course; the theory and methodology are supported by the concept of critical multiculturalism as seen in McLaren (1997, 2000). In my doctoral thesis, this concept was deepened by and linked to the peace studies of Galtung (1990, 2005, 2006), to empower multicultural peace education's potential to value cultural diversity and work for peace. Therefore, the objective of this study is to promote new dialogues and perspectives towards the understanding of the Brazilian national curriculum for foreign language in a multicultural and peace-oriented approach. This work is especially relevant since it pinpoints language as a means to building differences and homogenizing identities as shown by McLaren (1997) and Freire (2001). Their views illustrate the need to call the attention of education professionals to the importance of decolonizing discourses to promote a more democratic education.

It is also relevant to mention that this research emerges in a context where the

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Brazilian federal government has been providing opportunities and places for scholars to contribute and participate in the structuring of public education policies through their research, practice and expertise. (DALBEN *et al*, 2010)

In this way, my study aimed to gauge the potentials and limits to working in a multicultural peace oriented perspective in three different discursive sources: a) Brazilian national curricular policies (Brazil, 1998); b) the pedagogical project of a federal public school of excellence in Brazil- the Military School; c) multicultural material for English as a second language teaching, as well as the discourses of those who produced it.

Due to the limits of this paper, only information evidenced in the Brazilian national curricular policies will be presented.

## 2 Theoretical and methodological framework

From qualitative research on and a documental analysis of Denzin & Lincoln (2000), this study fosters a reflection on the teaching of the English language in a multicultural perspective and highlights the discussion on the transdisciplinarity of the theme “cultural plurality” in the Brazilian national curriculum. This discussion seeks to contribute to public education policies and to curricular/pedagogical practices committed to valuing diversity, social inclusion and a culture of peace in time of crisis. It also points out improvements, limitations and opportunities present in the Brazilian national curriculum to deal with a multicultural peace oriented approach (COSTA, 2009). It places emphasis on the criteria for the inclusion of foreign languages in the Brazilian national curriculum, such as social responsibility, social justification and relevance of teaching and learning a second/foreign language. (COSTA, 2001)

Since this curricular policy is currently in use in Brazil, I believe it is appropriate to revisit it in order to promote new dialogue and new perspectives. The theme “cultural plurality” proposed in Brazilian education policies and practices is important because

education in Brazil takes place in a multicultural environment surrounded by lack of respect for differences. It is also important due to the fact that the political moment in Brazil is promising for “Inciting the Social Imagination on Education Research for the Public Good.”

In this sense, my research highlights the multicultural approach used in the Brazilian national curriculum for foreign language through the lens of the critical multiculturalism of McLaren (2000), Zeus (2005), and associated with the peace studies of Galtung, (1990, 2005). As a result, the study calls attention to the asymmetrical power relations, the construction of differences and the colonization of discourses in the linguistic environment. It stresses the need to struggle against structural and cultural violence in school settings as seen in Galtung (1990) and the need to search for positive peace as shown in Galtung (2005).

The critical revolutionary and post-colonial multiculturalism of McLaren (1997, 200) points out the asymmetrical power relations from which cultural differences emerge and seeks to promote the decolonization of linguistic constructions implanted in the language by prejudices and stereotypes. These constructions reflect Western colonial perspectives and are registered in metaphors and other symbolic images already pointed out by Galtung (1990) as a mechanism of legitimizing cultural violence.

### 3 Data source and results

The data emerged from the three different discursive sources which I have mentioned; however, the focus of this paper is on the information evidenced in Brazilian national curricular policies for foreign language. (BRASIL, 1998)

The research revealed that categories such as discursive engagement, social construction of meaning, social and interactive view of language and learning are prevalent in the Brazilian foreign language curriculum.

The data collected showed that even though a multicultural perspective is incipient within Brazilian pedagogical and curricular practices; there are trends evidenced in the discursive source analyzed for working towards plurality. I consider this significant progress, particularly when the novelty of the theme and the doubts, mistrusts and discussions surrounding it are taken into account.

The curriculum talks about

The coexistence between boys and girls in the culture of the foreign language [...] the rights achieved by women in other countries, the organization of minorities (ethnic and non-ethnic) in other parts of the world [...] the issue of sexual orientation in other countries. (BRASIL, 1998, p.73)

It also points out that "when someone uses a language, he or she does it from a place historically, culturally and institutionally located, which is defined in the multiple marks of his/her social identity and in light of political values and beliefs." (BRASIL, 1998, p.35). In this direction, the national curriculum recognizes that

"In a multicultural country like Brazil, it is not constructive to work in the classroom with a view that excludes much of the Brazilian population from the usual child's representations, in the pedagogical discourse (it also includes his/her representations in the didactic material): white, catholic, medium class, speaker of an homogeneous variety [...]." (BRASIL, 1998, p.48)

The curriculum emphasizes that "language is central to the determination of human relations and the individual social identity. Because of this, it reaffirms the right to be culturally and linguistically different. " (BRASIL, 1998, p.48)

These examples demonstrate that the educational policies and practices proposed by the Brazilian national curriculum for foreign language attempt to instill educational practices that value cultural plurality. However, the curriculum leaves gaps because it values technical approaches and focuses on the content disconnected from cultural aspects. This is seen in the discourse below:

"The goal is to involve the student in the construction of meaning from the beginning [fifth and sixth grade], with less focus on the systematic knowledge of the foreign language. In the fourth period [seventh and eighth grades) systematic knowledge of a foreign language may be increased, since the student will have developed the ability to engage in a foreign

language. " (BRASIL, 1998, p.72)

At this moment, I question whether it is possible to consider that all students in the fifth and sixth grades have acquired the maturity or ability to develop a systematic knowledge or whether the development of more complex structures might contribute to school failure.

I also question whether it wouldn't be more appropriate to guarantee that those students who are excluded early from the foreign language education process (many students enter the labor market before completing primary or even entering high school) have the opportunity to learn a foreign language from the point of view of their sociocultural environment. Wouldn't be more useful for these students to be exposed to activities that aim to promote reflection on and discussion of topics that work towards citizenship and broaden students' knowledge, rather than working toward the development of a systematic structure of the foreign language?

It seems that the national curricular discourse conceives that all students have a determined and prior knowledge that enables them to delve into foreign language systematic structures in a specific grade without considering the individualities and cultural backgrounds of the students.

Although the national curriculum seems to be oriented towards a multicultural perspective, it changes its discourses and practices and in effect leans toward technical and homogeneous approaches. This approach considers students' differences chronologically and does not take into account their cultural differences.

The analysis of the discourse in the Brazilian national curricular policy for foreign languages has shown that there is the potential for multicultural practices which celebrate diversity and peaceful relations between peoples. At the same time, the analysis shows that cultural dimensions are not stressed enough in the curriculum and if these cultural dimensions were stressed, it would strengthen public education policies, and promote

curricular and teaching practices sensitive to the inclusion of differences, the elimination of inequalities and the construction of a culture of peace in educational environments. (COSTA, 2001)

#### 4 Final remarks

The controversial discourse presented in the Brazilian national curricular policies reflects the paradox that permeates educational nowadays.

We all know that the public domain understands education as a means to achieve social and economic mobility, to gain and secure employment and to develop future life skills. The increasing interest in education is reflected in reform policies, educational legislation and the financial resources spent on it. Nevertheless, technical, standardizing, ethnocentric and market-driven solutions to the everyday issues that schools, teachers and students experience have pointed out that the efforts made toward a new democratic vision of education are far from the public policy and the public good agendas.

Since the current context in Brazil is very promising for “Inciting the Social Imagination on Education Research for the Public Good”, it is appropriate to associate education research and practices more closely with education policies (as well as with other fields), in order to challenge exclusion and marginalization, as well as to address the issue of more democratic schooling. Although there have been a lot of severe criticisms of the performance of the basic education system in Brazil, important responses have emerged from the federal government with the implementation of a program called REUNI, which means *Restructuring and Expanding Federal Universities*. This Act was passed by President Lula’s Government and aims at increasing access to Brazilian public universities to an extent unprecedented in the history of this country. (DALBEN *et al*, 2010)

There are also public education policies created to encourage and offer training courses for teachers both during their initial training courses designed to keep them

abreast of current theories and practices. Associated with these policies, we have witnessed some educational changes in different states in the Brazilian federation. There are now forums for teacher training (FORPROFs) with the participation of a variety of public universities, managers, municipal and states secretaries of Education as well. (*op. cit.*)

In Brazil, the time is right for scholars to delve into the structuring of education policies through an active participation and contribution based on their research in education. These scholars may offer extremely relevant responses based upon research and practice for the construction of public education policies. (*op. cit.*)

In an era when all of us witness sociocultural disputes and fights for the consolidation and affirmation of ethnic minorities, the economic, social and cultural role of the English language, as well as its increasing impact on identity formation is crucial within a multicultural society. Language should be thought of as a means of deconstructing prejudices, stereotypes and bullying and as a means towards valuing cultural diversity, promoting positive peace and working for democracy.

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