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THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF “CURRICULAR FLEXIBILITY”, ITS LINES AND ISSUES ARISING DURING THE DECADE (2010-2019)

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Abstract: The aim is to show how the concept of “Curricular Flexibility” has been understood in schools and how it has varied over the decade 2010-2019. The aim was to discuss different opinions on curricular flexibility and show some less explored perspectives. Despite being a recent concept due to international synchronization in terms of student results and success rates, it is already a rising topic for authors discussing educational issues. The research tool used to carry out the study was the internet through the B-on and Google Scholar search engines. This was a qualitative approach, whose methodology was identified as a systematic theoretical analysis. In fact, we found that there have been no substantial changes in terms of the meaning associated with the term “flexibility”; however, we did find that there are different approaches and, with this, new questions arise.

Keywords: School, Change, Curriculum flexibility, Success

INTRODUCTION

The desire for educational independence is on the minds of all decision-makers in education, particularly in schools. The power to combat needs in terms of educational issues, using a flexible and rewritable curriculum with a view to being able to add and prioritize content, is a useful and desirable asset. It's easy to see the daily transformation that society is undergoing and, with it, the school community changes too. Schools have to deal with different challenges in terms of learning, discipline and social/cultural aspects that influence the organization and the associated dynamics.

In recent years, some authors have tried to bring out their vision of the concept of flexibility and reformulate the idea itself. Over the last decade, the desire for better school results has led to a constant rethinking of the state of education. There are no substantial

changes in meaning beyond the obvious one associated with the term “flexibility”. However, there are different approaches and, with that, new questions arise.

The aim of this study was to portray the position of various foreign authors during the second decade of the 21st century on what they understand by curriculum and flexible curriculum management. In different countries, there are different educational approaches and stances on what is meant by curriculum and flexibility, and it would be important to see if, between 2010 and 2019, authors share a common line of understanding, despite geographical, cultural and political differences.

The aim of this study is to use the information gathered and draw parallels between the opinions of Portuguese authors on the subject. In a second study, it will be important to highlight the convergent and divergent points between foreign and Portuguese authors regarding the concept of Curriculum and Flexibility.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The word “flexibility” takes us to the meaning of something that can be transformed or forced to take on other forms without breaking (definition found in Oxford dictionaries). This ability is welcome when we think about school-related topics. In this way, curricular flexibility can be seen as the ability to restructure education to the needs and interests of students (Mill, 2014). This author goes further and divides the concept (flexibility) into three branches: space, time and curriculum organization. Space, when we look at different eligible places to work as an educational environment; forgetting the “ordinary” classrooms, we can use libraries, outdoor spaces and facilities, laboratories, and any other space that creativity in teaching can think of. In terms of time, the school

timetable immediately springs to mind, but there are other time-related issues that should not be underestimated, such as the time spent between teacher and pupils or pupils and curriculum content. Time is a difficult parameter to manage in terms of flexibility; having the ability to do whatever we want with our time doesn't mean that we always decide well. So, as we will see later, flexibility can be difficult to work with and the results can take time to emerge. The third branch, curriculum organization, leaves room to be used in any order that suits the parties involved. In other words, we can organize the content in the way we think is best for particular students and reorganize the content in a different way for other groups of students; in doing so, they can benefit from the tailor-made path created just for them in the first place.

There has always been tension over where the curriculum should be based, whether from a prescriptive or flexible point of view. From Savage's (2018) perspective, it comes down to uniformity versus diversity, both of which are dangerous in the case of extreme positions (as cited in Jackson (2019)).

Looking at Steiner and Marope (2017), they agree that the term curriculum does not have a stable definition in itself and this can mean many things to many different people, as also mentioned in Jackson (2019); this is curious because, when mentioning the term "curriculum", the concept of flexibility is already part of the core meaning of this construct due to its unpredictability and the diversity of concepts it encompasses.

According to Bolívar (2018), autonomy and flexibility are tools that allow schools to improve their educational work, and without them it is impossible to achieve overall success. In addition to the above definition, the author states that curricular flexibility involves exploring different pedagogical ways of working (e.g. interdisciplinary tasks),

appropriate time/space management and flexibility on the part of the teacher, adapting to tackle different projects.

From Urrego's point of view (2018), flexibility is seen as a way of realizing pedagogical principles, but he identifies some abstract and undefined concepts when it comes to the definition given by the *Instituto Universitario de Educación Física* (IUEF) in 2005. This institute states that flexibility involves an open mind and self-awareness when it comes to meeting targets, selecting teaching materials and selecting workplaces; for Urrego (2018) all of the above does not present real measures and leaves it open to different interpretations. With this, the author defines part of flexibility: the possibility of creating from many perspectives and environments and what is seen as a barrier to the development of the concept (flexibility) is, in itself, a characteristic.

On the other hand, Urrego (2018) states that flexibility is something associated with neoliberalism, globalization and cultural deviations; for this author, flexibility is a solution for the times in which we live. Thus, based on what has been recognized, it is not just a rhetorical tool of curricular discourse, it is also the materialization of contemporary culture (Urrego, 2018). A different perspective is shown by Nieto (2002), who takes the definition to another reality by saying that, in dealing with flexibility, we are reconstructing the concepts of freedom, responsibility, trust and autonomy as we know them. Nieto (2002) mentions three perspectives on flexibility: instrumental, political and theoretical-conceptual. It is instrumental when it refers to the way we carry out flexibility; political when it involves the distribution of power within an institution and the last on the historical context, trends and fashions, its objectives, where it is applied, the types and limitations of the concept of flexibility.

However, from our perspective, this useful and liberating tool we call flexibility doesn't only come with advantages, but also with some associated disadvantages. With the "freedom" to manage everything related to the school, many other issues arise that somehow influence the expected result.

Taking teachers as an example, they see increased possibilities in terms of teaching, but competencies and roles inside and outside school are also increased; therefore, more responsibilities and work. This situation brings into debate the real benefit in terms of teaching and learning if we take into account the main objective, which is for the student to achieve the essential content to match the profile of students at the end of compulsory schooling. With these responsibilities, as Piovezan and Ri (2014) point out, there has been an increase in administrative and bureaucratic work, i.e. more meetings and "paperwork" to meet the demands of flexibility. In addition to all of the above, there are multiple projects that need to be streamlined, and teachers need to multitask full time and for a year. The bottom line is that teaching is no longer restricted to what happens in a closed room; with the ability to make choices, much more comes to the fore. Sometimes, as Oliveira (2012) mentions in his work, the tasks performed go beyond what is expected, often teachers find themselves in a position of parenting, hygiene controller, food provider, among other things (cited in Piovezan & Ri, 2014); tasks for which educators have not received training. The paradox is based on the fact that by giving teachers and schools the flexibility they need to meet their needs, they lose autonomy along the way due to the amount of work and bureaucracy.

Therefore, in order for all these points of view to reflect the diversity of opinion of the authors, it was necessary to carry out a study and outline the parameters to be

applied; also deciding on the most appropriate methodology that would meet the purposes of this study.

METHODOLOGY

In order to carry out our study, we used a mixed methodology to respond to our intention of portraying the position of foreign authors. We can consider two approaches, in terms of the nature of the methodology: qualitative and quantitative; and there is the possibility of combining these two and obtaining a mixed methodology. We will use the qualitative approach to be able to portray and analyze the opinions of the authors and we will use the quantitative approach with regard to analyzing the results obtained during the research carried out. It is therefore essential to understand the educational phenomenon so that it is possible to choose the best methodology to adopt (Miranda, 2009, p. 35): "In educational research, understanding the educational phenomenon is its main objective, so the decision on choosing the appropriate methodology is always of the utmost importance, even if difficult"

Research can be defined as the best process for arriving at reliable solutions to problems through planned, systematic data collection and interpretation. It is a tool of the utmost importance for increasing knowledge and thus promoting scientific progress, allowing man to relate more effectively to his environment, achieving his goals and resolving his conflicts (Cohen & Manion, 1980; Santos, 1999; 2002, p. 33).

The search tool used was the internet. The results are presented in a table (Table I) showing the search engines, parameters and filters used. Only authors who have published journal articles on the subject of curricular flexibility in schools were considered. The period chosen was the decade between 2010 and 2019.

Despite the large number of results, the documents that complied with the previously defined parameters were considered and analyzed. To do this, we used the “Skimming” technique, which is based on selective and strategic reading that looks for particular ideas and content, leaving out many of the details. In this way, it was possible to choose the most suitable documents from the thousands of results presented. It should be noted that there may be a percentage of non-use of valid documents, due to the speed of the process; however, given the short window of time to carry out the study, it was the most appropriate method. In order to identify the documents that were found to be valid and that meet the requirements of the selected filters, a table was drawn up (Table II) that identifies the document and the year of those documents.

Engines search	B-on	Google Scholar
Keywords	Curriculum, Curricular flexibility in schools, school flexibility	Curriculum, Curricular flexibility in schools, school flexibility
Time interval considered	2010-2019	2010-2019
Number of results	14271	26700
Terms that appear	In the title	In the title
File type	Adobe Acrobat Pdf (.pdf)	Adobe Acrobat Pdf (.pdf)
Rights of Use	Free to use or share	Free to use or share
Languages	Portuguese, English and Spanish	Portuguese, English and Spanish
Filter	Foreign publications	Foreign publications
Valid results	13 results	3 results

Table I - Parameters and filters used during the research

CONCLUSIONS

With regard to the view that the authors surveyed have on the subject, there is agreement that they understand the curriculum as something that can take on different identities. As far as flexibility is concerned, it can be understood as a tool capable of restructuring education, taking into account the needs and interests of students; it can be interpreted and worked on according to 3 prisms: space, time and curriculum organization. There was clear unanimity among the authors in considering the time parameter as something intrinsically associated with flexibility. There was also reference to the danger of taking extreme positions on curricular uniformity and diversity, both of which could pose problems if limiting perspectives are adopted. Other authors have warned of the difficulty of finding a consolidated definition for the term “curriculum”, as it can mean different things to different people. This means that the concept of flexibility can be understood as something undefined and varied. It is necessary to be open-minded and self-aware when it comes to meeting targets, selecting teaching materials and selecting workplaces. Flexibility is also seen as something associated with neoliberalism, globalization and cultural deviations; it is the materialization of contemporary culture. The authors also attribute other perspectives to flexibility: instrumental, political and theoretical-conceptual, highlighting the political nature of decisions.

However, there is a flip side to this and this flexibility also brings problems and obstacles. Teachers find themselves multitasking and their workload increases substantially. Bureaucracy and administrative issues also multiply, making it difficult to carry out activities and projects. In short, by giving the teacher the freedom to manage the curriculum, time, activities, space and tools, obstacles are also created that diminish this freedom - forming a paradox in itself.

Year/ Document	Document
2010	-----
2011	-----
2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • POLITICAL DISCOURSES ON EDUCATION IN PORTUGAL: IS THERE A PLACE FOR CURRICULAR CONTEXTUALIZATION? - José Carlos Morgado and Bruno Mendes; • Curriculum and textbooks in the context of curricular flexibility. A study of recontextualization processes - Sílvia Calado & Isabel Pestana Neves; • Transformations in the Organization of the Teaching Work Process and Teacher Suffering - Dalila Andrade Oliveira et al;
2013	-----
2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EDUCATIONAL FLEXIBILITY IN CYBERCULTURE: ANALYZING SPACES, TIMES AND CURRICULUM IN SCIENTIFIC PRODUCTIONS IN THE EDUCATIONAL AREA - Daniel Mill;
2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case Study Methodology: Flexibility, Rigour, and Ethical Considerations for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning - Marion L. Pearson; Simon P. Albon & Harry Hubball; • CURRICULAR FLEXIBILITY IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF RESEARCH PROJECTS TO IMPROVE STUDENT LEARNING. THE CASE OF NEPSO CHILE - Guillermo Williamson & Carolina Hidalgo;
2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reclaiming agency: Justice-oriented social studies teachers respond to changing curricular standards - Alison G. Dover; Nick Henning & Ruchi Agarwal-Rangnath
2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Common National Curriculum Base and Mathematics Teaching: making the school curriculum more flexible or more rigid - António Henrique Pinto; • Rethinking and repositioning curriculum in the 21st century: A global paradigm shift - M. Marope; • Curriculum research: What we know and where we need to go - D. Steiner;
2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • THE DISCOURSE OF CURRICULAR (IN)FLEXIBILITY IN DIALOGICAL ANALYSIS - Jozanes Assunção Nunes • EL DISCURSO DE LA FLEXIBILIDAD EN EL CURRÍCULO DEL INSTITUTO DE EDUCACIÓN FÍSICA DE LA UNIVERSIDAD DE ANTIOQUIA - León Urrego; • A national curriculum in a federal system? Historical tensions and emerging complexities - G. Savage;
2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Portugal moves: Autonomía y Flexibilidad curricular para promover el éxito escolar para todos - Antonio Bolívar; • Balancing prescriptiveness and flexibility in the school curriculum - Jen Jackson; • Flexibilization and Intensification of Teaching Work in Brazil and Portugal - Patricia Regina Piovezan & Neusa Maria Dal Ri;

Table II - Identification of documents and their year

After analyzing Table I, we can conclude that the keywords used in our search did not produce many valid results. The articles and texts consulted represent a small percentage of the results obtained. The subject itself is a recent one, which may help to explain the limited approach to the topic. On the other hand, this issue has many common features for the authors, which means that there is a consensus on some characteristics.

Table II shows the documents and the years to which they belong; although an evaluation of the valid results was carried out more quickly, the results can be considered scarce for what is supposed when we talk about Education, Curriculum and Flexibility. We can conclude that in the last decade there

have not been many authors working on these concepts and that the subject needs a more in-depth approach. This may be due to a lack of interest in the subject, the lack of importance of these issues in education or perhaps because it has already been covered enough. Although there is a percentage of error in terms of not considering relevant documents for research, it would be important to carry out a study to find out why authors pay little or no attention to the concepts sought.

The filters applied to the title, authors and period in question also help to ensure that the final result shows fewer articles and texts that are valid for our analysis.

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