

# CURRICULUM AND LIVED EXPERIENCE: NARRATIVE INQUIRY ON TENSIONS LIVED BY TEACHERS IN THE PROCESS OF CURRICULUM MAKING<sup>1</sup>

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## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is part of a larger research project (EDU2016-77576-P) linked with Spanish and European concerns about curriculum and educative relationships. The European strategic framework *Education and Training 2020* underlines that curriculum reform plays a very important role in modernising the education system. For this reason, over the past decade there have been significant curricular reforms, both at national and European level, with the purpose of improving education and vocational training (CEDEFOP, 2012) But, what is curriculum? What is its purpose? How can it help to improve education?

Rarely there is a coincidence between the planned curriculum, what is expected to learn by students and what they really learn in their experience at school. Then we could use and attend to two different ideas of which may become the origin of tensions in teaching practice: curricular plan and lived curriculum.

For our research, we take the notion “curricular plan” as a symbolic object (Stenhouse, 1987) that gathers the ideas of all stakeholders that are interested, for different reasons, on giving their opinion about what must be included in the classroom (Olson, 2000). Curricular plan is framed in a traditional curricular perspective, which takes it as course of studies, namely, as objectives and contents that are expected to be acquired by students at the end of a school period.

Given that experience (lived curriculum) precedes any kind of learning, taking education merely in terms of instrumental application sets limits on the autonomy and growth of students, since they are seen as an “objective object” separate from their context and experience (Van Manen, 2003).

In order to answer to the reality of lived curriculum, Clandinin & Connelly (1992) created the concept “curriculum making”, which understands that curriculum is experience, which is lived in a particular situation and relationally (Dewey, 1997; Schwab, 2013), so it is constructed and reconstructed narratively through the experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988).

When curriculum is understood as a plan or course of studies, it is forgotten that is the educative relationship what originates and promotes the construction of knowledge and, hence, makes learning possible. On this way teachers are living a continuous tension

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between two different voices: the requirements of curricular programs and their experience in the classroom with students.

From this concern arise the research questions: What tensions do exist between curricular plan and lived experience at school? How can teachers tackle tensions when curricular plan conflicts with the life of the classroom? Consequently, in order to answer to these questions we formulate the research proposal: delve into tensions lived by teachers between curricular plan and lived experience. This knowledge tries to open new lines of thought which can help to live tensions in a fruitful way (Contreras, 2016), instead of originate conflicts and disagreements with educational practice.

We talk in terms of tensions because it allows us to reflect the feeling that teachers live when they find themselves in the middle of opposing forces (Berry, 2007): on one hand are the objectives and contents of the curricular plan and, on the other hand, the necessity of attending to the particular life of the classroom.

Tensions can be lived in two different ways: either as a disagreement between opposing forces or as an impetus moving to ask and explore new ways of constructing the educative relationship, it means, in a fruitful way (Contreras, 2016). We do not try to solve or remove tensions because ambivalences are intrinsic to teaching profession. Rather, the goal must be to recognize them and manage the situation.

## **METHDO AND METHODOLOGY**

This paper is part of a narrative inquiry made in a High School in Málaga (Spain). Narrative inquiry (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007) pays attention to every singular life as constructed in relation with other people, in a particular situation and space, so it is focused on lives just as they are lived and told. In other words, we do not try to look for generalizable knowledge or absolute truths, but our intention is to get the sense of experiences and imagine possible alternatives (Clandinin, 2013) on the landscape of tensions that teachers live.

A main question guides us in the research: What tensions do teachers live in the process of curriculum making? In order to try to delve into this concern we have worked with Juan, a computer science teacher. We could define him as a teacher who takes care of his relationship with students, gives classes keeping in mind students' lives and shows a reflective attitude towards his own teaching practice. The purpose that leads us to work with him is thinking from his experience and his story (Blanco, Molina, & López, 2015), delving into the understanding of teacher profession and its complexities.

Fieldwork started in September 2016, we are gathering information weekly by recording interviews and classroom observation (Sierra & Blanco, 2015; Van Manen, 2003). This paper is focused on a specific moment of the scholar year in which the educational inspection asked the educational team of the high school to make a significant change in their classroom planning, according to the new Spanish educational legislation.

Though the relationship with curricular plan is constant, the short time period that teachers had and the virulence of the demands made that tensions (which normally are

calmed) increased and were lived with a higher power. For this reason, we concentrate the paper on this experience, in order to offer situations in which tensions between curricular plan and lived curriculum are palpable.

## RESULTS

Teachers' professional landscape (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) is full of voices that try to say what is important to do by teachers at school. Beyond the need to identify these stakeholders (Gimeno, 1988), what is really important is understanding their relation with teachers' curricular situation, given that they do not work in isolation but in a complex and dynamic relationship with the community (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988).

In order to think about tensions lived by teachers in this tangled landscape, we have located them in four different dimensions:

- **Needs:** curricular plan is made under the assumption that every agent involved knows students' needs and it is designed with the purpose of covering these inferred needs. However, when teachers come into the classroom, students can express needs that may be different (Noddings, 2005) and might conflict with the inferred ones.
- **Language:** teacher is located between two different languages (Bárcena, Larrosa, & Mèlich, 2006). On one side, curricular plan promotes a technical language, with a vocabulary that extols planning, objectives and evaluation of results. On the other hand, teachers must manage a language of experience, with a pedagogical vocabulary and focused on educational practice.
- **Time:** curricular plan establishes contents that teachers must achieve in a predefined time period. These times are often fixed following technical and administrative criteria, what generates stress and rushes to achieve predetermined objectives.
- **Uncertainty:** while teachers follow the detailed sequence of contents and objectives fixed on the curricular plan, they have to manage with tension that arises when their reality does not fit with the predefined program. The way in which tensions are solved will depend on the freedom that teachers have attending to the singularity of their classroom and using the program as a roadmap and not as a strict protocol to follow.

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