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The NMC Horizon Report Europe 2014 schools edition as a supranational curricular act

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Last year, New Media Consortium (NMC), in association with the European Commission, launched a report under the name of Horizon Report Europe - 2014 Schools Edition, examining trends, challenges and important developments in educational technology that are very likely to impact educational change processes in European schools over the next five years. Reading the report one can imagine that such likeliness will be due to deliberated policies aiming at transforming schools by means of incorporating digital technologies and by redesigning the usual roles of teachers and students.

It is important to acknowledge that NMC was founded in 1993 by a group of hi-tech firms composed by Apple Computer, Adobe Systems, Macromedia, and Sony that have realized that the success of their products depended upon their widespread acceptance, namely in education. It is also crucial to understand that the endorsement of this report by the European Commission is in itself a curricular act as it certainly will inspire further national curricular policies

The paper will analyze The NMC Horizon Report Europe: 2014 Schools Edition identifying and discussing its curricular implications.

1. Acts of curriculum and curricular acts

In Portuguese, the expression "curricular acts" usually refers to actions of an administrative nature related to enrolment, examinations, issuing certificates, etc. But we can also find the use of that expression referring to what teachers do when they plan their lessons or when they teach their students. It is, therefore, a polysemic expression whose meaning emerges from the context in which it is used. However, Macedo (2013a) uses the similar expression of "acts of curriculum" (*atos de currículo*), giving it a new dimension. According to him, if we are somehow creators of acts of curriculum, we are therefore *curriculantes*⁴⁴: the mother of a kindergarten student requesting explanations about what her child is learning; a teacher reflecting on the issues and activities related to mediate certain knowledge deemed to be educational; a student who questions the adequacy of the knowledge proposed by the curriculum as important to his life; the specialist who is hired to propose and guide important curricular policies; an employee who negotiates proposals for work and vocational training in strains of capital-labour relations; social movements that become protagonists of curriculum conceptions and curricular implementations, by critically proposing content for their training; they are all *curriculantes*. Therefore, they create acts of curriculum from the place of their interests and positionalities. To put it another way, anyone who is involved, from its political position, with curricular issues, is a *curriculante* actor, (Macedo, 2013b).

In this article, I propose to use of the expression *curricular act* with a meaning close to Macedo's *acts of curriculum* to be applied to analyse an ongoing situation in which supranational institutions are urging explicit national policies aiming at transforming schools, and thus curriculum, by means of incorporating digital technologies and by redesigning the usual roles of teachers and students.

2. NMC and its Horizon Reports

We live in a time when, perhaps more than ever, politics is a reflection of the economy, that needs consumers a lot more than citizens, and it is increasingly evident that the wave of industrialization, which began with the Industrial Revolution, is coming to an end. In this new era some refer to as post-modernity, late modernity, liquid modernity, or similar expressions, fundamental skills that the labour market requires are not the ones that helped industrialization to literally change the world in a few generations. In fact, punctuality and synchronization are giving way to flexibility and initiative; obedience to autonomy and creativity, all skills that the XIX century school deals with

⁴⁴ *Curriculantes* is a Brazilian Portuguese neologism referring those who create curriculum by means of their actions.

extreme difficulty. On the other hand, technological development, in particular digital technologies, are changing dramatically the way we live, the behaviours we have, how we relate to each other. The very relationship between citizens and their more traditional institutions like banks, for example, and also with the state, is now another. Can we remember the last time we went to a bank to withdraw money? When was the last time that we have entered a tax office to deliver a tax return? Not to mention the taxes that can only be paid via the Internet.

It is currently a political imperative that citizens can use digital technologies. Having the citizens digitally included allows the state to control them more effectively (the fulfilment of their fiscal obligations, for example), and, in addition, also reduces operating overheads of the state machine. And if this is true for politics, what about the economy in an era in which companies are on the Internet or do not even exist, and when the most powerful and profitable corporations have to do directly with digital technologies? Just think of giants such as Microsoft, Google, and Facebook, to understand the magnitude of the phenomenon of transformation that overwhelms us.

There are companies that lay off workers by e-mail or SMS. Virtually all jobs require digital skills and aptitude for using computer tools increasingly sophisticated. That is, the global economy needs education systems that use digital technologies, routinely, and where they graduate future workers familiar with them, ready to use them in the service of their potential employers.

Therefore, no wonder that, in line with this global economy, supranational political bodies such as the European Community, for example, issue statements and recommendations, and make reminders among States to bring them to the definition of educational policies which put the use of ICT at the centre of all priorities and aim to change dramatically educational practices and what is to be learnt in school. Illustrative of this global policymaking is the launch of the NMC Horizon Report Europe: 2014 Schools Edition, a joint publication of the European Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture and the Institute for Prospective Technological Studies, and the New Media Consortium (NMC).

It should be clarified that the NMC was founded on October 17, 1993 by a group of companies that included Apple Computer, Adobe Systems, Macromedia and Sony, hardware and software manufacturers, which, as can be read on NMC's institutional site, realized that the success of their products with multimedia resources depended on broad acceptance by the higher education community, which had not yet been reached. These companies believe that *"a community of innovators embedded in leading colleges and universities would amplify the impact of their tools in a wide range of disciplines, and that such a community could be uniquely self-sustaining and adaptive"*⁴⁵. Therefore, the NMC is active for over twenty years and in the last eleven has published its Horizon Reports, with a stated dual purpose, as it turns out: on the one hand, expand the market for its products, on the other and as a result, promote the transformation of schools and the way they work, integrating them into the real economy. And the fact that NMC Horizon Report Europe: 2014 Schools Edition was published in partnership with the European Community also seems to be a clear example of two things: the European Community recognizes competence and independence to the NMC to reflect on the relationship between education and technology, and the European Commission endorses the result of this reflection, by using its power to influence the Member States and public opinion to accept it as a serious, or even as unquestionable.

⁴⁵ <http://www.nmc.org/>

3. What for and who's who in the NMC Horizon Report Europe: 2014 Schools Edition?

The NMC Horizon Report Europe: 2014 Schools Edition begins to inform that it is the result of the answers that were given by a panel of 53 experts coming from various countries, including Portugal, to the following set of predefined questions:

What is on the five-year horizon for European schools?

Which trends and technologies will drive educational change?

What are the challenges that we consider as solvable or difficult to overcome, and how can we strategize effective solutions?

Answers to the questions are grouped in the report in three chapters with the following designations:

Trends Accelerating Educational Technology Adoption in European Schools;

Challenges Impeding Educational Technology Adoption in European Schools;

Important Developments in Educational Technology for European Schools.

Among other predictions and recommendations, the panel foresaw that the use of tablets and the cloud (cloud computing and tablet computing) is common in many European schools within a year, while learning through computer games (games and gamification of learning) and the combination of physical and virtual environments will be an integral part of teaching the next two to three years. They warn, however, that the development of remote and virtual laboratories and strategies that encourage students to take an active role in planning their learning (personalised learning) may take four to five years.

The report is signed by a group of writers who did not participate in the expert panel and is intended, as can be read in the introduction (p. 3), *"to help ministers, governing boards, and school leaders to strategically approach the further evolution of teaching, learning, and creative inquiry"*.

The only Portuguese participant in the panel is called Mario Franco, whose only given affiliation is Millennium.edu. This personality, with a degree in Philosophy, was responsible for *e.escola* program, launched in 2007 with the aim of *"promoting the use of computers and internet connections broadband by students enrolled in the 5th to 12th grade, facilitating access to the information society in order to promote e-inclusion and equal opportunities"*. It is therefore someone who does not belong to the academic world, nor is involved in teacher education. It is, rather, someone who moves himself quite easily in the real economy, having access to events organized by the World Bank, one of which had, in 2012, the *e.escola* project as a protagonist.

It appears that, suddenly, the transformation of schools and the traditional roles of students and teachers through ICT incorporation has become so urgent that there is no longer time and willingness to listen to those who, until now, were reasonably considered experts in education based on academic criteria. In fact the issue of school reform, in which the current one should turn into another closer to the real economy, has become an important and decisive issue, too critical to be left to academics, particularly in the field of education. The global economy and the supranational policies, supported by their local agencies (e.g. ministries of education, opinion makers, and so forth) operate openly in order to get the school as they wish, probably again in his own likeness, and act using those agents that look more appropriate and more reliable to get what they want .

Besides, to create the school the global market claims, perhaps the pedagogical thought is not that important. Perhaps even disturb, because the moment requires much more action than reflection. Industry and markets need to dispose current technologies in order to introduce new ones. The school, one hears around everywhere, in addition to having been stuck back in time, it has grown in complexity and awkwardness. It has bureaucratized itself. It has become too expensive for what reciprocates. Never so many teachers and so little innovation existed. Teachers were unable or unwilling to make the change and so they lost their opportunity. All in line with the narratives that seek to legitimize the delivery of education to the dictates of global capitalism, like this one so well synthesized by Facer (2011):

Rapid technological change in the 21st century will lead to increased competition between individuals and nations; education's role is to equip individuals and nations for that competition by developing 'twenty-first century skills' that will allow them to adapt and reconfigure themselves for this new market. But education and educators are ill-equipped to make those changes, as they have failed to adapt successfully to technological developments over the last 100 years. Educational change, therefore, needs to be directed from outside. (Facer, 2011: 2, 3).

4. *Curriculantes* are not all alike

The preparation and dissemination of the NMC Horizon Report Europe: 2014 Schools Edition is a curricular act. Even if it has marginalized the educational thought, namely the Portuguese educational thought with academic roots, it is nevertheless to be possible to include it in the broader set of major curricular acts at the macro level. In fact, the very exclusion of educational thought is also, in itself, a curricular act with meaning and effects similar to the acts of curriculum in Macedo's perspective. The difference between those acts of curriculum mentioned by Macedo, and this curricular act that joined NMC and the European Commission in order to put pressure on national governments to adopt measures to transform schools and the educational systems in a particular direction, is just scale: these curricular acts have on their side the power (are endorsed by major global companies and the all-powerful European bureaucracy) and the ability to influence (they are often for national governments as the scriptures for faithful who believe in them). The normative effects of these acts in the curriculum manifest themselves immediately. And if you can understand how repeated actions of ordinary people, Macedo calls *curriculantes*, in their intersections with certain aspects of the curriculum, can end up determining it in some way, it is easy to imagine the unstoppable influence of curricular acts, applied from the macro level.

Of course, at a micro level, one can always try to swim upstream. However, pedagogical innovation, for example, which is always a movement against orthodoxy, runs the constant danger of bumping against the curriculum, if attempted within the school (Fino, 2008). Yet, despite all the constraints, it might be a narrow margin of hope for those who resist, paraphrasing the inspiring Manuel Alegre's poem known as *Trova do vento que passa*⁴⁶. But very narrow, I am afraid.

According to the spirit of the mentioned poem, Paulo Freire, during a famous conversation with Seymour Papert, held in Sao Paulo in 1995, referred Althusser's ideological state apparatuses to declare that he always tried to see

⁴⁶ One of the poems included in the book *Praça da Canção*, published in 1965.

the other angle of school as an apparatus for reproducing the dominant ideology. And that other angle, which he called more dialectical, and less mechanistic, was exactly the angle of those who gave themselves the task of not reproducing dominant ideology (in spite of working inside the school). That was, he added, the same argument of those who want to change the general policy of the Society.

The problem is that, despite these examples, there are no great illusions about the disproportion of the forces involved, especially now, when capitalism regained the initiative to get the school that best suits, and whose bond with the old Republican citizenship became, if not obsolete, at least not very useful for employers. Nor seem to interest the market, the great "regulator" of the functioning of capitalism, to foster "innovation" that is not controlled by the curriculum, or encourage contra hegemonic actions, which try to prevent schools from functioning as reproducers of the establishment and, therefore, reproducing the dominant culture.

This belief, which I would like it is lucid, is obviously not a capitulation to the inevitability. It is just the realization that if it is true, according to Macedo, that we all can be *curriculantes* through our intersections with the curriculum, there is no doubt that the *curriculantes* are not all alike.

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