Building Socially Responsive Curricula through Emancipatory Action Research: International Contexts

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Two educators – one in USA and the other in Brazil – explore the possibilities and challenges for building socially responsive curricula through emancipatory action research. Habermas' works on *Theory of Communicative Action* and *Knowledge and Human Interests* provide the theoretical framework for understanding curriculum and educational research. Explorations of the impact of local and national policies on the authors' professional practices and research activities allowed them to compare the possibilities and challenges (in each country) for building socially responsive curricula. Right now, Brazil shows greater possibilities than the US, despite its limited material resources and personnel prepared to take advantage of those possibilities. In the US, the takeover of the education system by the corporatocracy with its market fundamentalism and assault to democracy has become a major obstacle for building socially responsive curricula in schools. The teacher / action research movement, though still marginal, is helping to counteract this trend. .

Key words: socially responsive curricula, emancipatory action research, Habermas' theory of communicative action, comparative educational policies, participatory (radical) democracy

Introduction

The growing takeover of public education by the corporate ideology of market values is embedded into the educational discourse, curriculum planning,

pedagogy, and evaluation of learning. Emery and Ohanian (2004) examine and document how comprehensive, pervasive, and interconnected is this takeover of public education in the United States of America (USA). Top-down standards, testing, professional development for teachers, training of administrators, textbooks and materials, and foundations created for promoting and disseminating this corporate agenda are some of the dimensions of this takeover. These authors provide key evidence of the corporate-government-media alliance to implement market ideology in the education system during the last three decades. Following the trail of this multidimensional takeover by corporations, Emery and Ohanian (2004, 114) came to realize that: "No matter who is talking about education reform, look for the footprints of the Business Roundtable". This dominant corporate ideology is what Giroux (2004, 1) has called a "free market fundamentalism". According to this market doctrine and *modus operandi,* free market principles of competition, efficiency and profit-making constitute the essence of democracy and *the* way to run the public education system. Actually, 'education leaders' from business and corporations, through the federal *No Child Left Behind* mandate, are determining to a great extent *what* (curriculum content) should be taught in schools, *how* (approaches, pedagogy, evaluation of learning) it should be taught, and *what for* (goals of schooling). The decision power resides in those corporations and not in citizens and/or the government "for the people and by the people". From this "market fundamentalism", Giroux (2004) argues, public education, along with all other social services, does not have a legitimate status. Private education is "what works".

Chomsky's (2000, 1) discussion on "Assault to Solidarity by Privatizing Education" points to the corporate creed when administering a social service: "Gain wealth, forgetting all but self". He paraphrases the declaration by the Lehman Brothers (a big investment firm): "Look, we've taken over the health system, we've taken over the prison system, the next big target is the educational system; so we can privatize the educational system, make a lot of money out of it." In this scenario, educators are stripped of their professional status and treated as no more than robots that follow pre-established directions. Students and their parents and communities are also alienated with such top-down curricula, which are irrelevant and meaningless, especially for

students who are not of the mainstream (middle-class and European-American) culture. Taking back public schools, including the rights of teachers, parents and students as stakeholders to have voice and vote in the decision-making process concerning the education of new generations, will require collective grassroots efforts. First of all, teachers need to ally with parents and other conscientious people from their communities to create a counter–hegemony by starting to build a socially responsive curriculum based on participatory democratic and humanistic values as an alternative to market for-profit values. A past example of counter-hegemonic resistance is the action research movement in England in the 70s and 80s. Elliot (1991) documents this movement, referring to it as "creative resistance" on the part of teacher participants in various projects by which they studied, developed, and evaluated curricula and pedagogy more relevant to the local needs, issues and perspectives of their students and communities. In the light of this experience, building a socially relevant curriculum is not only a right of teachers and students and their parents as well, but it is also a tool for starting a grassroots movement. This helps us to foresee the possibility of taking back public education as a public good to which the people have rights, without falling into blind optimism.

In this paper, two educators – one from Brazil and one from USA – explore the possibilities for building socially responsive curricula in educational practices and research activities with teachers. The contexts of Brazil and USA are quite different, among other things due to contrasting nationwide educational policies currently in effect in each country, and also to the ways in which teachers and students perceive their roles in the respective education reform.

In Brazil, great emphasis has been placed on *interdisciplinary* and *transversal* teaching as a part of the ongoing effort to reform and improve curricula. Brought into the Brazilian school system by the National Curricular Parameters (NCP), a reform proposed in 1996 by the Ministry of Education (MEC)[1], *interdisciplinarity* is an epistemological approach to knowledge

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[1] Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais (Ministério da Educação e do Desporto/Secretaria do Ensino Fundamental – MEC/SEF, Brasília, 1996). More details about the Brazilian curricular reform can be found in Moraes (2003).

aimed at overcoming the disciplinary and fragmented vision of knowledge. *Transversality* refers to a pedagogic approach that helps the student acquire a more comprehensive and critical vision of reality as well as of his/her insertion in this reality. Both concepts objectify a contemporary tendency away from the traditional school curriculum that has been characterized by fragmentation, linearity, alienation, and excessive emphasis on individual work. The key concepts are now integration, non-linearity, contextualization, participation, and collective work. This interdisciplinary "dialogue of disciplines" and the inclusion of ethics, cultural pluralism, environment, health and sexual orientation as transversal themes are only a general framework, hence allowing each school (teachers, students, administrators and parents) to participate directly in curriculum building. This in turn requires a democratic and autonomous administration for developing a pedagogical project with a vision of democracy and citizenship. In contrast, in the USA, the federal policy of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) represents the most comprehensive official takeover of public education by corporations. Consequently, school curricula are increasingly prescribed top-down in terms of alignment of key elements such as standards, benchmarks, content, textbooks and materials, pedagogy, and evaluation to fit the market ideology agenda for preparing the labor force (Emery/Ohanian 2004).

The fact of the matter is that both the US and Brazil need to develop curricula that can respond to the needs and potential of the students, their parents and communities, and not merely to the needs and interests of the corporate world. Brazil has at this time a national policy whose implementation requires the participation of all stakeholders (administrators, teachers, parents, students, and grassroots organizations for the most vulnerable groups of people) in building those curricula. Due to the history of top-down curricula and lack of material and human resources, Brazilian educators are struggling to meet those challenges and participatory opportunities. By and large, (not in all regions and schools) US educators may have more material and human resources than Brazil for building a socially relevant curriculum through Emancipatory Action Research (EAR); however, progressive US educators have their hands tied for the most part, or have been pushed out of schools, or have left the teaching profession altogether. Thus, while in Brazil EAR is a

means to build socially responsive curricula framed by the National Curricular Parameters, in the US EAR may be a path of "creative resistance" for building socially responsive curriculum. At any rate, despite the history, policies and resources of Brazil and the US, the future, as Freire (2005) argues, seems very problematic, but it is not inexorable. Specifically, the purpose of this paper is to explore the possibilities in Brazil and the US for building socially responsive curricula by using emancipatory action research in daily educational practice and research activities, as they are affected by distinctive national educational policies and contextual factors. But what are "socially responsive curriculum" and "emancipatory action research"? In the following two sections these approaches will be addressed.

1. Socially responsive curricula

The predominant notion of curriculum as 'means to attain given ends' (Tyler 1949) falls into what Habermas (1984) calls *instrumental rationality* and Schön (1983) calls *technical rationality*. In this vein, decision making in education is based on a *technical question* with no open consideration of values such as social responsiveness, cultural relevance, and meaning to the students. Curriculum planning as a 'technical production' has been developed co-dependently with the corporate-market ideology and the 'scientific thinking' which dominate industrial societies (Davis/Sumara 2000). This view of curriculum planning implies specifying outcomes, standards, and a system of accountability based on the market criteria of efficiency and competition.

Just as curriculum is conceived as a 'technical production', schooling is defined by the learning outcomes, which can be substantially predetermined and measured using standardized instruments coming from outside the context where the learning experiences take place. The learning process is assumed to be a linear, unidimensional, gradual, and universal assimilation of self-contained subject matters, topics and bits of information. The students – the learners – are dehumanized as objects of training, not as subjects of education. Knowledge becomes a commodity; that is, it can be produced, disseminated, sold, controlled, and legitimated by those with power to profit from it economically, politically and culturally. The type of knowledge that is

privileged will be that incorporated in the curricula for students to learn. The result is a 'banking model' of education, (Freire 1992), where curricula, materials and human resources are only means for attaining some predetermined ends.

There have been several approaches to curriculum planning. However, as Posner (1998) points out, most of them keep as central components Tyler's (1949) perspective concerning means-ends, the sanctioning role of experts, and the learning outcomes as defining the role of schooling. This ideology is so pervasive that even when curricula are supposed to be 'responsive' to students (Manathunga, nd; Cockburn 1999) or communities (PRIME 2004), responsiveness is merely assumed according to the curriculum planners' evaluation of what students and communities need. We believe that the participation of students and/or the target community in curriculum decisions, as well as the incorporation of their life experiences in the planning and implementing of this curriculum, is a *sine qua non* condition for a curriculum to be responsive to students' and communities' best interests. To be socially responsive means that students use their acquired knowledge and understandings to effect changes for the improvement of their own lives, their local and global communities. In brief, socially responsive curricula involve democratic participation of the parties at stake in the planning of curriculum, as well as students' experiences and interests as part of the curriculum implementation. The ultimate goal of these curricula is to educate students as citizens, committed and active participants in making the society more democratic, just and peaceful. These curricular goals are in sharp contrast with the corporate ideology. Following are some examples of socially responsive curricula carried out by committed and successful teachers who are working with multicultural classrooms.

Linda Christensen (2000), a high school teacher, demonstrates how to involve students in building a responsive curriculum grounded in their life experiences as the basis for learning about society, social responsibility, language and themselves. She develops with the students a "curriculum of empathy" starting with their own experiences of injustice and suffering. Thus, they start asking critical questions about social issues that impact them or other people they care about, and above all they start building

community as a class. Her students are encouraged to take the lessons and writings outside the classroom to promote social change, and to unmask the myths created to marginalize peoples, among others the myths about their own abilities or lack thereof.

In the same vein, Sweeney (1999), an elementary school teacher, provides us with an excellent model of integrated curriculum planning which emerged from students' earlier awakening to the problem of racism as practiced in other parts of the world and the United States as well, through a video on South African apartheid. Fourth grade students participated in the decisions about the different curricular activities to develop this unit. They planned various activities which integrated social studies, reading, play writing, math, arts, music, etc. Parents also were involved in some of those activities. Her commitment to social justice prompted her to build the curriculum around prominent social issues as starting topics. As she encouraged and nourished students' participation, they as a class started building integrated units collectively based on their own prior or emergent interests. Sweeney's (1999) approach to curriculum building and teaching is an example not only of integrative curricula including various subject matters, but also of integrating curriculum development and pedagogy. In contrast, the instrumental view of curriculum development separates curriculum planning and pedagogy, which usually are carried out by different personnel. The former is the realm of curriculum experts and the latter is the realm of the teacher.

The editors of *Rethinking Schools,* a journal published by a group of teachers committed to social justice, have a vision of "social justice classrooms", which they describe as: "Places of hope, where students and teachers gain glimpses of the kind of society we could live in, and where the students gain the academic and critical skills needed to make it a reality" (1994, 4). Their vision contains interlocking components, of which most are also central to socially responsive curricula and pedagogy: 1) "Grounded in the lives of our students": The curriculum should grow from and connect to the lives, experiences and needs of a given group of students, while understanding how they connect to or are constrained by social structures in the broader society. 2) "Critical": Educators need to enable students to ask critical questions such as: Who makes the most important decisions? Who is excluded from those

decisions? Who benefits? Who suffers? How can it be different? 3) "Multicultural, antiracist, pro-justice": These topics are studied from different perspectives, and should lead students to start questioning why some perspectives are ignored. Lead the students to see the misrepresentation of some 'subordinated' groups of people, and inequity in the mainstream curriculum and textbooks. 4) "Participatory, experiential": Give students the opportunity to experience the issues they are studying about by actively engaging in inquiring and working toward improving them. 5) "Hopeful, joyful, kind, visionary": Work with students to build a community in which they trust and care for each other, as well as develop a vision of the society they could live in and their role in building it. 6) "Activist": Promote and support students' moving from critical understanding of social issues to engaging in actions that improve their lives and the lives of others. They should learn from stories of resistance to injustice and oppression.

One component that we would like to describe further is the "participatory" one: we consider it crucial for making the curriculum *socially responsive* by embodying the principles of participatory democracy; that is, the involvement of students in researching the themes coming from their own life experiences, felt needs, interests and commitments. Sweeney's (1999) approach (described above) is a viable example of devising a situation in which students can participate more thoroughly in curriculum building. Furthermore, Freire's (1992) work on "thematic research" is of the utmost relevance here to identify themes and to study them through dialogue conducive to transformative action. Democratic participation in curriculum development implies that the stakeholders (teachers, students, their parents, and other educators and members of the community) should be part of such thematic research which consequently will reflect their experiences, concerns and interests. Democratic participation implies not merely selecting the topics from a menu supplied by the teacher or the school officials; it is actually the students' involvement in the research for identifying the themes from the reality they are living in and their participation in developing them.

Building a socially responsive curriculum implies integrating the curriculum around themes that are relevant and meaningful to students' lives and experiences, as opposed to separate subjects arbitrarily connected as 'school

work' aimed at achieving a diploma. The National Curricular Parameters in Brazil places languages, math, physical, social and life sciences on the same level as music, art, philosophy, history, interpersonal and intrapersonal relations. Schools in general have tended to value the logical/rational side of education; ethics, solidarity, artistic and body skills are relegated to a second level. The new tendency is to cover and integrate all aspects of human nature through interdisciplinary and transversal thematic projects.

By and large, the development of socially responsive curricula is emergent and in continual process of renewal and adaptation to the ever-changing needs, interests and urgencies of the stakeholders (e. g. teachers, parents, students, school curricula leaders) as well as the new knowledge and information available. In brief, socially responsive curricula, as understood in this paper, are democratic, participatory, culturally relevant, integral, holistic, and always evolving.

2. Action Research / Teacher Research

The evolving nature of socially responsive curricula, as conceptualized in this paper, demands ways of continually renewing and adapting those curricula to the local, regional and national historical circumstances. Action Research, as characterized by Carr and Kemmis (1986), may help respond to this demand. It is a movement to democratize and demystify educational research and knowledge production, distribution, and use. Action research is a collaborative, reflexive, and ongoing activity. According to these authors, it embodies both the democratic principles and the moral commitment to political action. It is not only based on retrospective reflection on one's own practice, but also on the creation of democratic conditions. So understood, action research is emancipatory, which implies that participants are not only acquiring more knowledge about the issue at hand, but also working toward improving their educational and social practices and their life conditions as well.

Carr and Kemmis (1986) develop the approach they call "Emancipatory Action Research" (EAR) based on Habermas' seminal works "*Knowledge and Human Interests*" (1972) and "*Theory of Communicative Action*" (1970, 1984, 1987)*,* and the action research cycle (planning, acting, reflecting and

re-planning) developed by the social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1946). The emancipatory dimension comes from Habermas' *emancipatory*-constitutive knowledge; hence, these authors assign a prominent role to "educational judgment" for making decisions on curricula or any other educational issues.

Nonetheless, the notion of *emancipation* has been contested on postmodernist (e.g. Lyotard 1984) and poststructuralist (e.g. Ellsworth 1989, Foucault 1972) grounds. Contesters consider '*emancipation*' as having foundational ideas such as rationality, transcendence of the subjects, and reaching consensus in order to seek liberation. In this vein, T. Brown and Jones (2001, 4) examine action research 'principles' with postmodernist lenses. They question the liberating goal of action research because "any emancipatory perspective presupposes values which cannot be agreed upon universally or permanently." These authors also question the idea of action research as "developing practice 'aiming for an ideal'" (p.60).

Going beyond postmodernism, R. H. Brown (1994) tries to reconstruct the ideology critique by, among other things, reconceptualizing postmodern *relativism*. He maintains that relativism "does not entail a society without standards. Rather, the conjoining of deconstruction and epistemology helps us to recognize where and how the standards are to be established cooperatively, constantly renewed and periodically reshaped" (p.28). As educators who are using the EAR approach in our teaching and research activities, we can give testimony to its relevance in counteracting top-down curricula. Thus, EAR helps to build socially relevant curricula, as R. H. Brown (1994) refers to it, in terms of cooperatively established and constantly renewed standards.

3. Habermas' ideas for building socially responsive curricula

Habermas' ideas on *Knowledge and Human Interests* and on *Communicative Action* help us to create conditions for reaching understanding and building consensus among participant stakeholders in curriculum development. His ideas also help us to connect the macro and the micro contexts, to understand the embeddedness of research with curriculum, and most of all, the centrality of language and communication for building socially responsive curricula.

Habermas' (1972) work on *Knowledge and Human Interests* starts by questioning the allegedly universal, neutral and privileged 'scientific' knowledge as uniquely 'valid' and 'reliable'. He argues extensively about the intimate connection between knowledge and human interests. Briefly, knowledge includes three basic types of interests: *technical, practical,* and *emancipatory*. The *technical*-constitutive-knowledge is based on the interest in technical or instrumental control of nature and society. It takes the form of 'scientific' cause-effect explanations. The *practical*-constitutive-knowledge is based on the interest in understanding and clarifying situations for effective and meaningful communication. The *emancipatory*-constitutive- knowledge is based on the interest in understanding intersubjectively the oppressive conditions that many people live in, as well as for undertaking actions to overcome those conditions. Habermas considers these types of knowledge as existing and valid for their own purposes. By and large these three types of knowledge – technical, practical and emancipatory-constitutive – should be the basis of curriculum planning and implementation. As noted above, EAR goes hand in hand with the notion of the *Socially Responsive Curriculum* perspective as defined in this paper, and contrasts with the technical or instrumental view of curriculum.

In Habermas' (1984) *Theory of Communicative Action,* the instrumental view is presented as one way of reasoning. He counterposes to this dominant *instrumental rationality* the *communicative rationality*. Instrumental rationality is related to the *technical*-constitutive type of knowledge, by which 'truth' refers to the state of affairs in the world 'out there' and 'effectiveness' refers to the way we acquire and use knowledge to gain control over that state of affairs in the world. In contrast, communicative rationality connotes unconstrained dialogue by which participants overcome their subjective views and work toward reaching understanding through raising claims to be criticized and giving reasons mutually.

Habermas' (1987) distinction between instrumental reason and communicative reason helps us to understand how the area of curriculum has been dominated by instrumental rationality. Instrumentalism is reflected in curriculum planning as the act of finding and testing the means to reach the outside-in and top-down education ends which are imposed on schools. Reaching un-

derstanding, for Habermas, is a process of arriving at an agreement among subjects on a communicative basis; it cannot be imposed by any of the parties, whether by instrumentally intervening directly in the situation or by strategically influencing the opponents' decisions. We consider that this communicative process of reaching understanding and negotiating consensus among school curriculum stakeholders such as teachers, students, parents, and administrators is a key factor in building socially responsive curriculum. A situation of ideal communication would require symmetrical relations, "pure intersubjectivity exists only when there is complete symmetry in the distribution of assertion and dispute, revelation and concealment, prescription and conformity among the partners of communication." (Habermas 1987, 371).

Participants in a communicative interaction negotiate the terms of the situation based on the cultural system of beliefs and pre-understandings which constitutes the cultural background of the participants, their *life-world*. Life-world is a pre-determined set of meanings with which speakers provide themselves in order to understand, interpret and act in the world. The life-world, the background in which intersubjective relations and interactions are built, is constituted of the objective world (the world of facts), the social world (norms), and the subjective world (feelings and emotions) (Habermas 1984). The life-world often is opposed by the *system* organized, ideally, based on common rules – local, national or universal – that have been previously discussed and approved by the respective stakeholders. The challenge is how to balance the demands of the system and at the same time never lose sight of the life-world. The schools are part of a public system financed by public money and also are part of the life-world.

In communicative action, reaching understanding is a cooperative process, which implies that each participant incorporates the others' interpretation of the situation oriented by the same *telos* of seeking understanding. These conditions of stability and absence of ambiguity constitute the "ideal speech situation", although they are the exception and not the rule in the practice of everyday communication. Most encounters do not have the purpose of reaching understanding through communication.

Communicative action is situated in context, which is constituted by segments of *life-world* of the participants in the communication. However,

Habermas (1987) indicates that not every linguistically mediated action may be considered as communicative action. He argues that an exclusively empirically-based understanding of communication lacks the illuminating power of a theory that allows connecting actual communicative acts with the sense and reason of being, of being-in-relation in the world.

Postmodernists like Lyotard (1984) assure that Habermas' commitment to communicative rationality and transformative ideal is actually a metanarrative of emancipation. For Lyotard, the only way to give opportunity to all voices to be expressed is through a 'continual conceptual revolution', that is through rhetorical discourse which opposes the 'dialogue of argumentation' proposed by Habermas (Brown 1994). In a similar vein, for Foucault (1972, 1994), reason and the emancipatory *telos* implied in its foundational basis have been used to legitimate domination as "only one possible form among others" (Foucault 1994, 118). Habermas also disavows the emancipatory potential of reason as a prime condition of democratic action. Nevertheless, he defends communicative action as an enactment of democratic dialogue and political action. Habermas criticizes Foucault for collapsing reason into domination, as well as those who "abandon reason to feel free" (Brown 1994).

The reconstruction-of-ideology critique, including the emancipatory interests and action goals, implies for Brown (1994, 25), among other things, redefining truth, reason, and reaching consensus: "Cognitive, moral and civic truths are no longer seen as fixed entities according to a meta-theoretical blueprint of linearity and hierarchy; instead, they are invented in ongoing self-reflective community…". Notwithstanding, he criticizes both the postmodernist ideas of Lyotard and those of Habermas because both eschew the moral and political dimension. Lyotard reduces it to relativism, and Habermas reduces it to idealist transcendence. In addition, both divorce truth from desire and passion. Despite these idealist limitations, Habermas' ideas of 'communicative action' and 'knowledge and interest' help to develop an alternative approach to research, 'emancipatory action research', and an alternative to prepackaged or top-down curricula, 'socially responsive curricula'.

4. Building socially responsive curricula through Action Research in the US

Myriam's practice

My professional practice is based on the belief that teacher education may be a vehicle of improvement of participatory democracy in schools and in society at large. Thus, emancipatory action research becomes an instrument for empowerment of teachers, their students, and hence the school community. The democratization process includes the improvement of students' participation in curriculum redesign and pedagogical choices through dialogue and communicative action (Torres 1997).

The evidence presented below demonstrates the possibilities as well as the constraints in engaging teachers (mostly early or mid career in-service teachers), enrolled in a master's program in Curriculum & Instruction, in building socially responsive curricula through emancipatory action research, as I have taught the course on action research or related courses at two universities in the southwest of the US over the last 10 years. Part of the coursework is a teacher / action research miniproject at each participant's worksite. It is considered a miniproject, given time constraints – one semester only – for planning and implementing the project, and showing at least some preliminary results. Teacher participants are asked to focus on their own teaching practice. Sharing work-in-progress reports and dialogues among peers, facilitated by the professor, have been critical in keeping participants on track and in facilitating their understanding of the theory and strategies of action research as they experience them. Each participant's miniproject becomes a topic / process for the whole class to discuss and learn from.

As the instructor, I often model for them the study of my own practice as they engage in their own action / teacher research, studying their own teaching. As we discuss the various dimensions of their studies, I share with the course participants my own ways to document my teaching, that is, my own study which may be called a metaproject. For example, I keep a reflective journal in which I record the development of the course and the major insights and difficulties faced by participants and myself. In order to make my own metaproject feasible, I keep notes from students' journals, miniproject

reports, and conceptual papers. One limitation of my own ongoing action research study is that I have contact with students during one semester only and have not been able to follow up on whether or not they continue doing action research. One year I did a presentation with a group of teachers in a national conference, which prolonged the contact with them. Two out of five teachers had continued doing research in their schools, even including other colleagues. Such a follow-up is a project for the near future.

4.1 Possibilities

It is my experience that as teachers participate in graduate courses in which they are asked to conduct studies of their teaching and classroom practice, many of them (around 50%) become enthused with their new role of teacher-researchers. They are able to find an intimate link between research and teaching in a dynamic way. From this insight, it is easy for them to see themselves as having "a say" in the school curriculum and many other related issues. They have become more confident in providing evidence and rationale to explain why they teach the way they do. However, there are always some skeptics of the 'seriousness' or the 'academic' character of action research projects.

4.1.1 Recurrent themes / issues brought up by teacher participants

Research is not part of being a teacher: Many of the classroom teachers approach their research 'miniprojects' with hesitation, fear, or skepticism. Doing research is not part of their job description, and it certainly appears to be an overload. In addition, the prospect of examining their own teaching makes most practitioners uneasy.

Enjoying collaboration: The isolation in which most teachers (especially elementary teachers) work is always an issue they start talking about as they experience collaborative work with their peers in various groups (Torres 1999). An assistant principal wrote in his final report: "The help that teachers can give to each other, if all parties are open to constructive criticism, is enormous."

Mandated curriculum: In the US there is a Federal- and state- mandated, highly prescribed literacy curriculum for elementary children. The basic approach to this curriculum is founded on the view of language as consisting of

discrete language abilities; in particular, phonics training is a prerequisite for learning to read and write. Christie, a first grade teacher, reflects the struggle she is dealing with: "One of the most dreaded subjects is our first grade phonics, which is the adopted and required program of our school… I have tried to do what I can to dress this dry program up."

Testing: This is one of the major sore points for public school teachers nowadays in the US. Joseph captured the disempowerment experienced by him and his colleagues because of the loss of genuine participation in decisions that they feel belong to them, such as curriculum planning, evaluation of learning, and having an influence on the allocation of rewards for students.

> "Changes that came with the onset of 'high stakes testing' have radically affected teachers' attitudes. Teachers feel they have no 'say' in what happens at the school. One participant said: 'The political aspects of the testing craze have driven teachers to teach to the test at the expense of education'."

As far as administrators are concerned, it is imperative to raise scores in standardized tests, and this in turn puts great pressure on teachers, who in turn put pressure on the students, often by drilling, to prepare for the test.

4.1.2 Path to emancipatory empowerment

As teacher participants in my Action Research course engage in emancipatory action research, they start feeling empowered as education professionals (Torres/Mercado 2004). The final remark of Cory's project report illustrates clearly her sense of empowerment as an education professional:

> "I now have a better understanding and appreciation for my practice. For my profession! I am a professional! Not just a teacher! I am willing to change, not for the sake of change but for the sake of coming out of my box and making new discoveries. I am work-in-progress! My practice is a work-in-progress! Action research lives in my practice!"

From course participants' reports, it can be said that many of these teacher researchers have improved their own practice and their understanding of it, which are two of the three overarching goals of emancipatory action research as indicated by Carr and Kemmis (1986). However, some challenges come up. First of all, not always does the improvement of practice lead them to

make their curriculum more socially responsive; second, there is no guarantee that this improvement is going to last after the semester is over; and third, the possibility of impacting the school's, district's or state's ways of doing things is minimal, given the current circumstances. So building socially responsive curricula requires major and concerted efforts among the stakeholders.

Unfortunately the US teacher / action research movement has not achieved national visibility and impact on federal educational policy as it did in England in the 1960s and 70s (Elliot, 1991). As Zeichner (1993) and Coulter (1999) point out, most teacher-researchers have worked more toward getting their voices out as professionals of education than toward effecting school reform that is more socially responsive and culturally relevant. However, my experience with teacher researchers supports the idea that 'nourishing' teachers' voices as education professionals is a huge step toward the democratization of their classrooms, and hence toward becoming actively engaged in school reform (Torres 1997, 2001).

4.2 Challenges

At the present time in the US, educators, including teacher researchers, face major challenges due to the federal policy "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) and the plethora of tests and other implications that it brings. As Stan Karp (2004, 9) puts it: "The core of NCLB is a system of federally mandated 'accountability' that attempts to drive education policy down a one-way street paved with standardized tests". NCLB is actually a very persuasive measure, accompanied as it is by a comprehensive campaign to convince the very people who are being hurt by it that this policy is the best ever produced on education. But one does not need to exert much effort to find out that this policy is harmful for students, especially minorities, as well as teachers and school administrators. It is harmful because it assumes that curriculum, pedagogy and learning can be standardized, top-down mandated and evaluated; it mandates randomized experiments as the best way to conduct research in education and assumes that only the knowledge coming from empirical studies is valid. This policy provides the conditions for an antidemocratic education and curriculum which is culturally irrelevant and socially non-responsive.

Some educational administrators and teachers complain that it is inadequately funded; however, as Karp notes, full funding would make it worse, because this measure is really a "test and punish" approach to school reform with the objective of weakening public education and hence promoting privatization and marketization (see www.ed.gov/nclb for more information about this policy).

The deterioration of teacher's autonomy under NCLB mandate by increasingly contriving curricula is becoming a serious obstacle for the advancement of the emancipatory action research movement; yet at the same time it may serve as a path of 'creative resistance' to bring educators together to fight against this type of mandates. The US education system is becoming increasingly anti-democratic and controlling. However, as Freire (2005, 23) notes, it is of utmost importance to have hope and determination in forging our future. He maintains: "one of the conditions for continuing the struggle against a dominant power is to recognize ourselves as losing the fight, but not as defeated".

In this vein, as teachers embrace emancipatory action research in their classrooms, various possibilities can be opened up: First, the possibility for opening their classrooms to students' participation and hence to start building a socially responsive curriculum where the experiences, interests and needs of students and their communities count (Torres 1997). Second the possibility to produce knowledge concerning teaching, learning and schooling, which contributes to their professional development. Third, the possibility to create networks of colleagues engaged in emancipatory action research and thus to become empowered to promote changes within schools and within the school district. Wells (1994) refers to these networks as 'communities of inquirers', able to promote bottom-up changes in schools and at the district level.

Concerning research in education, the NCLB policy has narrowly defined research for purposes of federal support. The policy in effect prescribes and mandates just one way of doing 'valid' research, the so-called "scientifically-based research". This refers to the type of research which is quantitative, randomized experimental, and follows the 'treatment' medical model. Following Habermas' categories of knowledge-constitutive interests, this "scientific-based research" endorsed by NCLB policy yields just the *technical* type of knowledge. As he would argue, this technical knowledge is just one of three types of knowledge and leaves out the *practical* and the *emancipatory*

knowledge, which he considers central to social and human sciences. Education has to do with social and human phenomena. The problem is not only that this federal regulation imposes a methodology, but that the funding of research is restricted to those who follow such methodology. This is certainly a major setback for diversity and democracy in educational research in this country. We are going back to the first half of the 20th Century when there was hegemony of the medical model in education via behaviorist psychology. The difference from those times is that now this singular research approach is mandated by federal regulation. Susan Neuman (2002), assistant to the Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education, in a speech on "scientific-based evidence" equates medical practice with educational practice: "The bottom line here is these same rules about what works and how to make inferences about what works, they are exactly the same for educational practices as they would be for medical practice" (p.3).

At this point we must re-open the discussion on the necessity, relevance and validity of research paradigms and methods other than the quantitative and their randomized experiments. It is more than four decades since Thomas Kuhn (1962) published his book "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions", which formally opened the discussion about alternative models of research (actually in the natural sciences), and most of all the impact of beliefs and frameworks that a scientific community has on the ways the members of that community study and perceive the phenomena under investigation. Progressive educators dispute the exclusive character of NCLB in terms of what constitutes valid knowledge, and defend the relevance, validity and usefulness of action research and other non-quantitative paradigms. This was also a matter of advocacy by progressive educators such as John Dewey a century ago. Unfortunately, NCLB is hampering the timid emergence of teacher / action research as an alternative paradigm to the more conventional quantitative and qualitative paradigms. The constraints imposed by NCLB impact both teaching and learning in schools and the preparation of future generations of educational researchers, due to the exclusion from governmental funding if these teacher-researchers do not adhere to the mandated approach.

Olson (2004) responds to Slavin's (2002) defense of "programs that work", as defined by NCLB regulation, by arguing that those programs are

only another way to justify the control of teachers and schools. Research in classrooms is more about learning experiences, goals and hopes, and relationships teachers build with students, and much less about the information that is handed out to those teachers. Olson maintains that rather than handing down ready-made curricular programs such as "Success for All", of which Robert Slavin is the author and promoter, teachers should be given freedom and support for making informed decisions in ever-changing contexts.

Although all of these challenges and obstacles are very real, the fact of initiating and encouraging teachers to engage in teacher / action research could be a way to build a "creative resistance" (Elliot's, 1991, expression) to imposed curricula which disrespect teachers and alienate students. Historically, when attacks like this happen, they also can be propellants for creativity and organization to resist those measures, to reclaim the classroom and the schools for meaningful learning and experiential democracy.

5. Using Habermas' theory of communicative action in curriculum development in Brazil

Silvia's practice

When the National Curricular Parameters (NCP) were officially introduced to the educational community in 1998, I conducted a couple of curricular studies in public high schools, in a small city of the State of São Paulo, Brazil, under the sponsorship of the CNPq (Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico), prior to using Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action (TCA) for helping public school educators implement the educational reform of the time. The first study (Moraes 2003) was aimed at examining the curricula at work, through a *dialectic-hermeneutic circle (*see Guba/ Lincoln 1989, for the definition). The conclusions reached at the circle allowed us to depict the Brazilian school curricula as based on a positivistic, fragmented and alienated conception of science; quantity was given a more privileged place than quality; pedagogical work was presented in the traditional, obsolete view of quiet, silent, passive classes, with students working individually, one behind another, memorizing concepts that had no connection with their lives or even their remotest interests.

The second study I conducted (Moraes 2005) was aimed at examining the ways a school community was implementing *interdisciplinarity* and *transversality,* two of the basic principles of the National Curricular Parameters (NCP). Through a *dialectical-hermeneutical circle* (Guba/Lincoln 1989), educator participants realized that the teachers were gradually assimilating and approving the idea of interdisciplinarity and transversality: they had started looking for topics of every day life and using them as generative themes for their interdisciplinary / transversal projects. A few teachers had even started consulting their students about the topics they were interested in. However, participant teachers came to realize the difficulties in following the demand for changing suddenly to think and work in an interdisciplinary manner, in addition to have to deal with a major contradiction of Brazilian society: on one hand, the school is pressured to prepare the labor market force; on the other hand, youngsters are expected to leave school capable of taking a firm stand against exploitation.

As a post-doctoral project (1999-2001), and under the sponsorship of São Paulo State Public Schools Administration, I used Habermas' TCA and the Emancipatory Action Research approach, both of which embody the democratic principles of participation, interdisciplinarity and transversality, in order to frame the discussion of an autonomous and democratic school administration. This action research project entitled *Autonomous and Democratic School Administration in the light of Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action,* had the specific purpose of presenting the concepts of communicative and instrumental rationality, communicative and instrumental action, lifeworld, and ideal speech situation (Habermas 1980, 1995) as a theoretical framework to inspire the everyday school actions needed to concretize curricular, pedagogical and administrative reform in the public school system. Transversality in curricula, according to the Brazilian Education Reform, includes transversal themes – Ethics, Cultural Pluralism, Health, Environment, Sexual Orientation, and Work and Consumption – while providing incentives for students to generate study-topics that are relevant and impacting to their lives.

Emancipatory Action Research was used not only as a research approach, but also as content of the initial preparation phase for the Curriculum Coordinators of 24 elementary and secondary public schools in a small city of the

State of São Paulo, Brazil. Curriculum Coordinator participants in the study were introduced to the TCA and main concepts of EAR in 10 meetings of 3 hours each. Participants got together in groups of 6-8 people from different schools, attempting to implement the notion of an *ideal speech situation* in order to try to reach consensus about problems they were facing in their schools, and negotiate the types of possible (communicative) actions to take. After 2 ½ months 11 out of 24 curriculum coordinators continued participating in the study. The ones that stopped their participation alleged lack of time, and some even admitted openly that they were fearful that the process would shake the old and well-known structure in which they had been working for many years. The curriculum coordinators who continued participating in the study used the notion of ideal speech situation in other situations such as curriculum planning, class councils and PTA meetings. They wrote down their conclusions from implementing the TCA for curriculum planning and evaluation in their respective schools and sent them to me via e-mail, fax or posted letters. We met twice a month to analyze these reports and to decide the next steps. Participants were asked explicitly to comment on the extent to which the concept of ideal speech situation (ISS) was helping them to facilitate those meetings and decisions and to become more democratic and consensual, as well as to compare them with more traditional ways of running the meetings for curriculum planning and evaluation. They were also asked about difficulties they found in the use of ISS and the other notions of the TCA, as well as how ISS helped them to implement the school pedagogical project.

5.1 Impact of the implementation of TCA at schools: Illustrations

The reports sent by the curriculum coordinators who continued in the study show their engagement with the TCA including ISS, and the impact on their daily activities. Below there are three illustrative examples of such engagement:

School #1: With traditional administration, the student finds it difficult to feel responsible for his own acts and for the school property. In the administration that tries to make use of the notion of the ISS as a main device, the student has the right to express his ideas as a student and as a citizen; there-

fore, he is responsible for what goes on in the school. The difficulties that we find are mainly due to the family structure which is very authoritarian. When we use the ISS, we have what we call "conscientization"; however, this only happens in the long run. A pedagogical project that has the ISS as a main element is more easily and efficiently implemented than one that is "imposed".

School #2: We at State School XX, when we first were introduced to Habermas's theory, were already accustomed to communicative practice in our school because we understand that living in society requires minimum rules that must include every one, otherwise our points of view (which we always believe to be the only true ones) will prevail. … An administration that has the ideal speech situation as a guiding principle is more democratic and participative, allowing the growth of the group, although we find on our way difficulties such as the power of the media that influences the students more than the teachers, the lack of authenticity of some teachers for fear of being misinterpreted, the lack of commitment of some to follow what has been agreed on. However, the ISS stimulates us to do our everyday work because it raises our self-esteem since we have active voice in that which is being decided, and also it increases our commitment towards education. EAR together with TCA makes us become researchers of local reality, articulating it with knowledge that is available and offers us space for reflection with local communities. …Education has now the objective of making competence prevail over competition, and aims at solidarity which leads to emancipation.

School # 3 – The teachers in our school had long asked for some time to discuss issues that referred to what was going on inside their classrooms (disciplinary problems, different levels of learning). The dynamics used did not bring us good results because the majority of teachers would only read the texts I (as curriculum coordinator) proposed but did not internalize the concepts suggested. I then decided to adopt action research methodology which, in my opinion, consists of raising real conflict situations and searching for theoretical framework – the "light" – to resolve conflicts. Even though teachers had different views of discipline, their participation in the dialogue to reach some consensus helped them change attitudes and visions of the problem. Discipline, we concluded, has to do with participation and adequacy of activities with regard to the needs and interests of each group. Since then, we

have not stopped discussing all issues that concern the school and we are now trying to bring the rest of the community into our discussions".

In one participant school, teachers observed that students resisted school work and the coordinator reported that this reaction was due to the "sameness" and mediocrity of classes. The students were demanding much more than what was being given to them. Their commitment is fragmented and weak because they do not create bonds in the school.

5.2 Possibilities and challenges in using Habermas' TCA at schools in Brazil

By examining the overall experience of this study, one can say that:

The application of Habermas' theory of communicative action could help democratize the administrative organization, including the curriculum, at the public schools in Brazil, in the sense that more power would be given to local communities and local voices. However, the challenge of "dialogue of disciplines" (interdisciplinarity) can only be attained if teachers learn how to work collaboratively.

Transversality guarantees progressive, integrated, context-bounded curricula, given that schools following this national curriculum parameter should ask students to analyze reality around them and to put curriculum contents into a critical perspective. Nonetheless, the challenge for implementing this type of curriculum perspective calls for improving the working conditions of teachers, in order for them to feel that they 'belong' to the educational institution. Teachers argued that their apathy and lack of interest to embrace the new more democratic schooling is due to poor working conditions, especially because they have to work in 2 or 3 different schools in order to earn a decent salary. It becomes clear that in order for teachers to be able to implement the parameters of transversality and interdisciplinarity in the curricula at public schools in Brazil, teachers need to feel that they 'belong' to the school.

In the face of discouragement and disbelief among public school teachers, who have been brought up in an authoritarian school system and *cognitive-instrumental way of reasoning*, great efforts are needed in order to use communicative rationality in situations where democratic participation is desir-

able and a consensus must be reached to function on the daily basic school activities.

Research participants identified the characteristics of the school as part of a public *system* and at the same time as belonging to a *life-world*. The *colonization* of the life-world, that is, the process through which the system invades the life-world by dominating, regulating and coercing it to economic and administrative demands, was evidenced and exemplified by participants. As participants understood this colonization and the crisis in the school system as the latter becomes isolated from the *life-world*, they became more aware of their social responsibility as educators. They should work to close the gap between the school system and the life-world of their students and their own.

The school must develop a vision for itself, vision being the degree of consensus concerning the future of the institution, so that daily activities, plans and projects are integrated and aimed at a common goal, the purpose of the "pedagogical project" that is being elaborated and put into practice.

6. Contrasting Brazilian and US educational contexts for building socially responsive curricula

Given the strong ideological difference between the governments of these two countries, the economic, social and educational policies are quite opposite. US policies for schools are now fundamentally top-down with a tight control through a heavy standardized curricula and testing, thus creating the conditions to discredit, dismantle, and ultimately privatize public education. In contrast the policies of the Brazilian government are, as promulgated, open to bottom-up initiatives and participation in building socially responsive curricula.

Socially responsive curricula, as characterized in this paper, embody the ideals of participatory democracy; hence they can be grounded in the lives of students and their communities, integrated by interdisciplinarity and collective work, experiential and transformative, and in continual renewal through inquiry. As we learned from Silvia's emancipatory action research study with a group of curriculum coordinators at public schools, there are possibilities for engaging in building socially responsive curricula, but there are also serious challenges. The new vision of participative democracy is being pursued

in Brazil with arduous efforts despite retrocessions. To implement it, the government is basing its policies on councils that represent the various social segments such as the Social and Economic Development Council, the Monetary Policy Committee, and the National Educational Council. The schools must also change their administrative policy based on the School Council, Class Councils, and Parent-Teachers Associations. Each of these councils includes delegates from different social segments to discuss and give suggestions to the central government.

Unfortunately, in the USA the latest federal policy euphemistically labeled "No Child Left Behind" has been appropriated by many states, and the trend is toward dramatic reduction or total abolition of the democratic participation of the stakeholders other than those appointed by government officials. Curriculum, student achievement, and teacher certification are now for the most part 'top down', with heavy monitoring and control including social scorn when students or the school in general do not meet imposed standards.

Standardized testing in the United States has become the driving force of all curricular activities in public schools. Therefore, it is common practice to 'teach to the test' or even 'teach the test' at the expense of providing meaningful and relevant education to the new generations. Rather than promoting, supporting and rewarding the efforts of teachers who dare to engage in more creative practices such as classroom inquiry, they are harassed and devaluated by standardized testing and teacher-proof curricula such as "Success for All". This is happening especially in the so-called inner-city schools and those where the majority of students are from 'minority' and 'English Language Learners' backgrounds. The only 'progress' pursued is the increment of test scores, which is narrow and even depressing. Dennis Carlson (2003, 1) characterizes this type of progress, according to the "No Child Left Behind" policy: "If this is progress, it is a kind of progress that is wreaking havoc with the lives and hopes and dreams of urban youth". We cannot say less about the teachers' situation. The fact is that many teachers are leaving the profession altogether.

With some exceptions across the nation (e.g. the "Rethinking Schools" group, "Teachers for Social Justice" and "Maestros" in the Bay Area of California) teachers are becoming more and more trapped in these antidemocratic

measures and processes. Adding to this is the culturally and socially rooted individualism which precludes teachers from looking for support and getting organized in order to be able to voice their concerns and have their rights respected. Academic freedom has been swept away under the guise of accountability and efficiency.

Grounding the curriculum in the lives of students and their communities, even when those communities' histories, culture and language have been excluded from the 'official' curriculum, would be highly possible under democratic conditions. This would also increase the possibilities for students to be prepared for real world situations, and to act upon their knowledge toward improving their life conditions and society at large. The prevailing antidemocratic conditions fuel some conscientious educators to engage in risky but liberating "teaching in dangerous times" as Ladson-Billings (1998) put it. This is the situation we are living in the US nowadays.

While in Brazil the National Curricular Parameters of interdisciplinarity and transversality facilitate educators to construct integrated and socially responsive curricula, in the United States, especially in the area of language and literacy, the trend is toward disintegrative and meaningless curricula. The type of curriculum based on instrumental rationality is dominated by the efficiency criterion at the expense of integration for meaning and relevance.

A socially responsive curriculum is always in construction and reconstruction through emancipatory action research. As indicated above, this type of research approach facilitates the constant renewal of the curriculum based on what really matters to students. It enhances the possibilities for curriculum innovation, participation and transformative educational ideals, above all when national policies, curriculum parameters and perspectives are embedded in a participatory democratic education policy.

Although with great limitations, today the Brazilian educational system is a more fertile soil than that of the US for the blooming of action research as coadjutor of the building of socially responsive curriculum. EAR may be greatly helpful under constraining conditions such as in the USA, as a movement of "creative resistance" (Elliot 1991). It is a proven and promising approach to reclaim teachers', parents', children's, and civic society's right to

participate in planning, implementing and evaluation of the curricula for the education of new generations.

As has already been pointed out, contemporary power structures are attempting to make public education accountable to market forces. The unique responsibility of socially responsive curriculum builders is to contribute to the rehabilitation of the public sphere and the inculcation in the civil society of its essential function of regulating and controlling the state and market spheres. When the civil society is not in such control, those who benefit from school "reform" are not the students or the teachers, and even less the middle- or low-income communities which these schools serve. In the US specifically, the ones who benefit most are those with vested interests such as the testing industry, publishers of textbooks and test preparation materials, vendors of teacher-proof prepackaged curricula, the private organizations that take over those schools that are unable to raise their scores on standardized tests, private schools that receive government vouchers, and the like.

The Brazilian public school system has to rely to a great extent on the creativity and good will of its teachers, as well as volunteers who are promoting courses and activities for the members of their communities during weekends. These components – good will and voluntary work – have facilitated the use of EAR and communicative action in school curricula because they encourage collective work.

In terms of the emancipatory action research that took place in Brazil, so far it has helped in building socially responsive curriculum, and supported interdisciplinarity and transversality; participants verified the need to promote interest and involvement of students; and finally, and probably most importantly, participants recognized that there was a new feeling of collectivity and solidarity that must be strengthened among teachers and students.

Habermas' work is relevant for education and curriculum because it provides tools for the common construction of knowledge emphasizing the human capacity for communication, for dialogue. Confidence in argumentation, in logos, in the construction of dialogue of coherent speech, is the fundamental antidote against violence. Violence is the opponent of communicative rationality, of emancipation. Democratic participation is the *sine qua non* condition for developing socially responsive curricula. It works when a conjunc-

ture of political, cultural, and economic (available and allocated resources) factors allows stakeholders to actively participate. In contrast, testing, top-down curricula and pedagogy, and rigid schedule organization represent serious constraints for teachers, school initiative, and responsiveness to students' interests, contexts and perspectives. In contrasting the educational systems of Brazil and the US, Brazil shows more promising conditions for building socially responsive curricula through emancipatory action research. However, nowadays the national and global trends constitute a great threat to those openings.

Silvia is now living in Fortaleza, CE (northeast, less developed and poorer area than São Paulo) and she is engaged in a similar EAR-TCA project which also aims at comparing and contrasting national contexts. Participants have registered a certain drop in Brazilian "Habermasian optimism" due to a pervasive disappointment with the political situation (better said, with the Workers' Party that is in power right now). The conservative / neo-liberal wave that is taking over the planet raises difficulties for any emancipation project. However, as in São Paulo, research participants (educators) are hopeful that through communicative action, they can open the possibilities for a more democratic and socially responsive education for Brazilian children and youth.

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