

# Towards the construction of an intercultural national curriculum for Basic Education?

This article reflects upon the progress achieved in the construction of an Intercultural National Curriculum for Basic Education. For the author, recognizing the diversity is in itself an achievement; likewise, she maintains that the process of constructing an intercultural curriculum involves accepting the existence of different visions.

## ¿Avanzando hacia la construcción de un currículo nacional intercultural para la Educación Básica?

En este artículo se reflexiona sobre cuánto se ha avanzado en la construcción de un Currículo Nacional intercultural para la Educación Básica. Para la autora, la visibilización de la diversidad es un avance; asimismo, sostiene que el proceso de construcción de un currículo intercultural implica aceptar la existencia de distintas visiones.

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More than a decade ago, the limits of curricular diversification were defined for the Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE) when observing that “beyond the intercultural approach or strategy adopted, every IBE program have been trapped in the diversification of basic monocultural curricular design in their conception, structure, and objectives” (Trapnell, 2008: 1). This is how, from the perspective of the IBE, the need for an intercultural national curriculum was posed. These days, this concern goes beyond the field of education from and for native peoples. The need for an inclusive curriculum of diversity which is consistent with the “inteculturality for everyone” approach, as contemplated by the General Law of Education, is undeniable.

The question is how much progress we have achieved in the construction of an intercultural national curriculum for Basic Education. In an attempt to answer to this question, this article examined the Basic Education National Curriculum, passed on June 2 of 2016 by means of Ministerial Decree No. 281-2016, based on the following questions: How does the curriculum addresses the sociocultural and linguistic diversity which defines us as a nation?, and to what extent does it offer conditions for a wisdom exchange on education?

One first breakthrough of the National Curriculum refers to making diversity visible. Indeed, the acknowledgement of Peru as a diverse country, inhabited by sociocultural groups that have created different lifestyles, worldviews, and knowledge, is present in several of its sections. In fact, in the section referring to the current social trends questioning the way Basic Education has been fulfilling its role, “the acknowledgement and enhancement of knowledge from various cultures recognized as ancestral wisdoms which do not always agree with the knowledge generated by modernity” is posed. Plus, it is accepted that this tendency and the massive acceleration of knowledge production “have not yet found the break-even point to allow them to establish complementarities based on a dialogue of knowledge that favors the treatment of common challenges posed by the current reality and which need to be addressed as a society” (Minedu, 2016: 5). Likewise, the National Curriculum recognizes the existence of 47 native languages and the need for a specialized treatment for those who speak an indigenous language and Spanish as a second language.

Moreover, the profile of Basic Education graduates contains several cues and explanations regarding the existence of diverse identities, worldviews, and wisdoms:

- The first feature of the profile, “[the student] Recognizes him/herself as a valuable person, and identifies him/herself with his/her culture in different contexts”, refers to the existence of various identities and historical and cultural backgrounds which build a sense of belonging for the student.
- The existence of ancestral wisdoms is contained in the feature “[the student] looks into and understands the natural and artificial world, using scientific knowledge as well as local wisdoms in order to improve the quality of life and looking after nature”.
- The need to show respect and tolerance of various worldviews, religions, and beliefs is addressed in the feature “[the student] Understands and values the spiritual and religious dimensions in the lives of people and societies”.

The cross-cutting approaches also reassert some commitments with diversity, such as the rights-based approach, which considers “the consolidation of democracy the country is experiencing, thus contributing to the promotion of individual freedoms and the collective rights of the nations” (Minedu, 2016: 13).

The program of the area of Social Studies for Primary Education reasserts what was considered in the profile of the graduates and in the cross-cutting approaches, “enhancing the cultural diversity of the country through the knowledge, appraisal, and implementation of different traditional wisdoms that have survived throughout our history, and through the acknowledgement of the worldviews of the different peoples, both in Peru and in the world.” It also fosters the formation of “intercultural citizens who know and value the cultural diversity of our country and of the world, and their interest to know it.” In the same manner, “It promotes the recognition of inequalities between cultures, and the search for alternatives to overcome them in the settings where students work, and poses the challenge of overcoming the idea of sociocultural diversity as a problem in order to build a collective project of society jointly, within a framework of respect for certain agreed values and rules” (Minedu, 2016b: 8).

This openness to cultural diversity and the recognition of its close relationship with processes of citizen building is an undeniable breakthrough that should be understood in the light of different factors, among which we can highlight the acceptance of intercultural, inclusion, rights, gender, and citizen issues in the global



debate on education; the presence of an organized indigenous movement that voices its demands to defend their collective rights and those of other social movements advocating for issues regarding rights and gender. Additionally, the coordinated work performed by the different departments of the Ministry of Education (Minedu) have allowed, among other things, positioning some of the demands of the IBE.<sup>1</sup> However, the Curriculum also shows limitations in its way of understanding and addressing diversity, which somehow comes into contradiction with its definition of interculturality, as we will next see.

One fundamental issue has to do with the way ancestral wisdoms are addressed. As I already pointed out, the 2016 National Curriculum recognizes the existence of different wisdoms and their importance to meet common challenges, which in itself is a step forward in an educational system that has ignored them historically. However, it determines the possibilities for a dialogue when stating that the student will use “scientific procedures to verify the validity of his/her hypotheses, local knowledge or observations as a way engage with the natural and artificial world”, when explaining the issue of the profile regarding the use of scientific knowledge in connection with local knowledges. When making this clarification, the Curriculum confers science the power to validate the knowledge constructed by different so-

ciocultural groups. Thus, it reinforces the hierarchy of scientific knowledge above all other knowledge, and contradicts its definition of interculturality, which recognizes the dynamic nature of the cultures and their changes, pointing out: “provided that there is no aspiration of predominance or control by any of them” (Minedu, 2016a:15).

By positioning the scientific knowledge as a means to validate the indigenous wisdom, the National Curriculum pulls away from opinions which view wisdom exchange as a “dynamic, enriching and *fair* interrelation between systems of wisdoms and knowledge from different cultural traditions” (added italics), which implies that none is superior or inferior to the other, and that all of them allow responding to different needs and demands.

By placing the ancestral wisdoms in a subordinate position regarding science, the National Curriculum perpetuates what Quijano (2000) calls the “colonization of knowledge”. With this concept, he refers to a hierarchy of knowledges where some will appear as superior, universal, and sole valid sources of knowledge, while others remain subordinate. This situation is inconsistent with the assumptions of a national education system that, formally, considers the appreciation and respect of cultural diversity as a guiding theme for the education in the country.

In that regard, it is worth recalling Walsh’s warning:

<sup>1</sup> In this regard, the distinction between the mother tongue and Spanish as a second language for students belonging to any of the 47 native languages is historical.

“ [...] the problem is not simply to recognize the plurality but also to decolonize (in essence, to politicize) knowledge, because it helps structure, legitimize, and justify the dominant power and subordinates. This requires a deconstruction of the systems of truth, the set of representations they (re)produce, and the power coordination that are present within them, both in their local and universal/global ideologies. It also requires an incorporation of alternative and different forms of conceiving, producing, and using “knowledges”, when focusing on our initial questions, what knowledge(s)?, whose knowledge?, knowledge for what purposes?, and knowledge for who?” (Walsh, 2001).

Another issue we should not leave aside refers to the treatment of religion. Although the National Curriculum states that the student should show respect and tolerance toward the different worldviews, religions, and beliefs of people—which is a significant breakthrough—the area of Religious Education leans toward Catholicism, and states that children practicing any given religion or set of beliefs may be exempt according to the legislation. Thus, the Curriculum excuses the school from the responsibility of contributing to the spiritual education of children based on a wider vision which transcends the limits of a particular religion.

Turning back to the original question on how much progress have we made in the construction of an intercultural national curriculum, based on all the evidence presented, I would have to say that we have moved from a curriculum which addressed intercultural issues in an expository manner, with specific references to the idea strategically placed in different sections (see Trapnell 2009), to an attempt to interculturalize the curriculum through the incorporation of issues regarding identity, citizenship, questioning discrimination and racism, as well as references to the wisdoms and knowledge of native peoples in the foundations of the programs of certain areas. Nevertheless, the task of building a national intercultural curriculum is still pending.<sup>2</sup> Addressing the construction of an intercultural curriculum involves opening a negotiation space of power in the field of education (Garcés & Guzmán, 2003). This involves much more than merely recognizing the existence of the sociocultural and linguistic diversity of the country, and its contributions and implications in the different aspects of social life.

2 I am referring to the distinction Juan Carlos Gonzales formulated in the course “Guidelines and experiences for the intercultural curriculum design” of ITACAB between: “proposing interculturality at an expository level, interculturalize the curriculum, and building an intercultural curriculum.”

The process of building an intercultural curriculum implies accepting the existence of different visions of reality, and distancing from approaches that seek the “sole and universal truth”. Based on the dialogic perspective that proposes interculturality, it is necessary to open the national education to the admittance of diverse knowledge and narratives from a perspective which accepts knowledge as a social and cultural construction, and recognizes the contributions of different cultural traditions (including science) in order to respond to the different needs and demands—where this does not involve establishing hierarchies. This is still a pending task. 

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