

## **Meanings of Quality in the Curriculum Policy (2003-2012)**

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**ABSTRACT – Meanings of Quality in the Curriculum Policy (2003-2012).** This paper presents the results of a research into the meanings of *quality of education* associated with curriculum in the period 2003-2012. Dealing with theory of discourse, it is argued that the articulation between the discourse of *quality aimed at being total* and the discourse of *social quality* is favored by the equivalence between demands of knowledge. Like surfaces of inscription of political meanings, 57 documents from the Ministry of Education of this period are analyzed. The Workers Party political platforms of electoral campaign in 2002, 2006 and 2010 are also analyzed.  
Keywords: **Knowledge. Curriculum Policy. Quality of Education. Discourse. K-12 Education.**

**RESUMO – Sentidos de Qualidade na Política de Currículo (2003-2012).** Este artigo apresenta os resultados de uma investigação sobre os sentidos de qualidade da educação vinculados ao currículo na política educacional no período entre 2003 e 2012. Operando com a teoria do discurso, defendemos que a articulação entre o discurso de qualidade que se pretende total e o discurso de qualidade social é favorecida pela equivalência estabelecida entre as demandas relativas ao conhecimento. Como superfícies de inscrição de sentidos da política, são analisados 57 documentos produzidos no âmbito do Ministério da Educação no referido período e textos de programa de governo divulgados pelo Partido dos Trabalhadores na ocasião das campanhas eleitorais de 2002, 2006 e 2010.  
Palavras-chave: **Conhecimento. Política de Currículo. Qualidade da Educação. Discurso. Educação Básica.**

## Introduction

This paper presents part of the results from a wider investigation on the discourse of K-12 curriculum policy in the period between 2003 and 2012, during the government of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, with meanings that remain in the government of Dilma Roussef, initiated in 2011. For the analysis of this discourse, we considered 57 documents<sup>1</sup> produced by the Ministry of Education during the aforementioned period, one document from CONED (National Congress of Education)<sup>2</sup>, and the Workers Party (WK) government program for the electoral campaigns of 2002, 2006, and 2010.

Under the government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, a project of curriculum centralization, often called neoliberal, was implemented: national curricular parameters, evaluation of textbooks, national systems of evaluation. These proposals were highly criticized by Brazilian curriculumists<sup>3</sup> and there was a great expectation on the part of social movements and curriculum field researchers that the new government would change this situation. After all, the educational policy that Lula's Government aimed at putting forth, in its first term, attempted to oppose the educational policies established in previous governments, which, according to the discourse of the WP project, had been incapable of universalizing education with quality. The intention was (and still is) to establish itself as an antagonistic rupture with Fernando Henrique Cardoso's government project, having this been the hallmark of Lula's Government Plan, in the 2002 campaign.

Nevertheless, in terms of the curriculum policies in the researched period, there has been a marked continuity of the mechanisms for centralization of power<sup>4</sup>, and even an exacerbation, with proposals of a national curriculum<sup>5</sup> and intensification of the National High School Examination (ENEM) as a path for higher education. The release of statements pointing to the importance of school rankings is not necessarily done by the government, but it is highlighted by the media and the educational institutions that show their favorable results, and not met with any counterargument in the governmental statements. The critiques to these centralization mechanisms, despite their existence, did not increase nor assume the prominence they had in the 1990's. We have what can be considered as a *project of curricular centrality* hegemony, with a certain silencing of critique by means of different symbolic mechanisms that deserve to be investigated at another instance.

In tune with works in the field (Lopes, 2004; 2008, and 2010, for example), when speaking about the hegemonizing of a centralized curriculum policy, we are not referring to a process in which the educational institutions of the federal government are assumed as centers from which the discourses emanate. We are referring to a decentered discursive process that has the curricular texts signed by the Ministry as an additional representation. It is through this approach that we defend

the existence of a curricular theory that subsidizes the policies' texts and, by doing that, it also makes us producers of meanings for the policies in course, always in complex processes of translation. The direct contribution of researchers from the field of curriculum in the writing of these texts only reinforces the position that we assume regarding the nexuses between curriculum theories and policies. In this sense, every educational text is, in some extent, a political text, it is part of the policy's textuality. When investigating these texts, we are then mobilized by the possibility of reading this translation as a discursive field that does not have fixed meanings - the reading can always be a different one, but it is made possible by a given instituted way of interpreting (Bowman, 2007).

When naming this policy as a *project of curricular centrality*, we aim to refer to the constitution of a discourse produced by the articulation of different social demands in the period between 2003 and 2012, considering the temporal limits here established as blurred. Traces from other times, in the Derridian sense, reveal as specters that insert themselves discursively in contemporary times (Wolfreys, 2009). There are actions of the Lula and Dilma's governments – as there had been in the Fernando Henrique Cardoso's government – aiming at producing a center in the curricular policy. Similarly, the international funds supporting the infrastructure for these purposes are known. The discourse, however, is not limited to these actions. Such a discourse is instituted by a wide articulation to which we can refer by a generic signifier – a name – agglutinant of meanings.

We do not search to identify, therefore, which are the governmental practices that support this discourse, even though we do not disregard how much the discourses are imbricated to these practices. Neither does it interest us to investigate the sources of financing of the policies. Not only because other authors have already dedicated themselves to this focus, but also because we do not conceive that such dimensions, by themselves, hold the meanings of the curricular policy. It interests us to understand the curricular and pedagogical meanings that sustain such articulations, the linguistic operations that make the hegemonizing of certain meanings of politics possible. We have specifically located the discourse where notions of relevant knowledge are imbricated to the evaluation purposes, making such notions equivalent to verifiable knowledge. With this movement we think it is possible to deconstruct what is sedimented as pedagogical imaginary from which it seems impossible does not seem to be possible for us to cope.

In tune with a discursive and post-foundationalist understanding of the curriculum, we aim at challenging the ontological status of the foundations, with the consequent introduction of *the political* as a moment of updating the foundations, an impossible and necessary enterprise at the same time (Marchart, 2007).

We are dedicated to analyze how the hegemony of the curriculum centralization project is presently developed/maintained and which articulated demands have been contributing to this process. We explore the understanding of the curriculum policy as a discursive struggle for the constitution of representations, by analyzing the curricular discourses in the policies. If we understand the negotiation in the curriculum policies as a discursive articulation, we claim that different particular curricular demands are able to articulate among themselves in a provisional and contingent way. Thus, they constitute certain representations and social groups for the curriculum.

When investigating the signifier *quality of education*, we defend that the hegemonic curricular discourses tend to develop by means of the construction of an antagonism to a given representation of curriculum. The curriculum being introduced is marked by the idea of innovation and is seen as progress in relation to what is (has been) accomplished, for being antagonistic in relation to a negativity one wishes to overcome. The border between what is projected and what one wishes to overcome is constructed by means of empty signifiers (Laclau, 2011). We investigate the emptying of meanings of the signifier *quality of the education* as one of the constitutive mechanisms of the centralized curriculum policy's hegemony. There are so many social demands in relation to what comes to be quality of education, from those tuned with the socioeconomic conditions of life to the interpersonal relationships in the work places, that quality is emptied of meaning. It is by means of this emptiness, never complete, always tendentially empty, that the expression *quality of the education* is able to agglutinate different demands and to constitute different subjects that act in its name, always in opposition to an idea of school without quality. We do not attribute a negativity meaning to this emptiness. We argue that this is the political way by which one operates and hegemony is produced.

It is necessary to understand, therefore, the process of representation of this antagonism, as there are no social actors defending an education without quality. Nevertheless, a representation of the enemy to be faced is constructed from what it lacks. There is no objective characteristic that is inherent to it. Even if one enumerates the characteristics of this enemy, they are not associated exclusively to it nor do they characterize, in an objective way, the absence of quality, given the uncountable differences that allow the existence of this meaning.

We have specifically examined in this article different meanings of quality that are currently circulating, analyzing how the articulation between two discourses of quality, initially constructed as antagonistic, is made: the *discourse of quality that intends to be total*, disseminated, in part, with support of business groups, and the *discourse of social quality*, constituted, also in part, by social movements. We explore the problematics of the identity/subjectivation of these groups later. We de-

find that such articulation produces the hegemony of a discourse centered in the curricular policy and limits the possibilities of constitution of other pedagogical imaginary. We aim at examining the mechanisms that make such articulation possible, with prominence for the equivalence demands around the signifier *knowledge*. In view of this purpose, we initially develop an analysis of the antagonisms between projects of quality previous to the period of Lula's first government, and, next, we show how we understand the construction, in recent years, of the relation between curriculum and quality.

### **Antagonism Between Projects of Quality**

The advocacy of quality of education is not a new project and neither can it be associated exclusively with the period focused here (2003-2012). In the constant attempt of social mobilization around education, repeatedly the quality of curriculum is affirmed as part of everybody's struggle, projecting an imaginary social unity and a curricular consensus. Being in school and reaching instructional levels that are common to all the students, evidenced by national and international exams, are naturalized as expression of quality of the curriculum and, therefore, of education. Ball (1994) had already highlighted how much the educational reforms tend to be analyzed in terms of their capacity to reach first order effects, tied to instructional objectives, and with this their second order effects, linked to the possibilities, for example, to extending what can contextually understood as broader social justice, are not analyzed. Intangible effects, that escape to the metrics and to the calculation, tied to the cultural dimension in which education is inscribed, tend to be disregarded in the analysis of educational policies.

The discourse of quality was specially spread out by the Total Quality Management proposals, in the 1990's<sup>6</sup>, marked by a close relationship between the ways school operates and business dynamics, but it is not limited to this period. As the most recent emblematic example, the movement *Todos pela Educação (All for Education)*<sup>7</sup> associates the goals of quality to the process of school inclusion, reducing the age-grade gap, and to reaching adequate instructional indexes, based on criteria established in centralized tests, mainly the K-12 Evaluation System (SAEB), of the Ministry of Education (MEC), and the Brazilian Evaluation of the Outcomes of the Literacy Cycle (ABC Test), organized by the National Institute of Educational Studies and Research (INEP, part of MEC), by the Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics (IBOPE, a private organization) and the Cesgranrio Foundation (specialized in testing).

Given the conflicts around the curriculum different groups aim at designing, such discourse of quality is antagonized by different agendas of social movements and the educational community. Trying to move away from this instructional signification, multiple actions are

developed in the construction of a project of *social quality* by means of the affirmation of a critical education.

The education is here understood as a tool of formation in a broad sense, of struggle for the rights of citizenship and social emancipation, preparing the people and society for the responsibility of constructing, collectively, *a project of inclusion and social quality for the country* (II National Congress of Education, CONED, 1997, our emphasis).

Knowledge is defined as committed to social issues, looking to connect curriculum and quality of education to social transformation and this to a project of Nation. The goal is to set a meaning of quality that is distinct from a discourse of efficiency and efficacy, characteristics of the instrumental conceptions of education.

As Marchart (2007) claims, without antagonism there is no possibility of meaning production. Through an antagonism to the discourse of *quality aimed at being total*, the discourse of *social quality* is instituted. By the negation of the project of quality linked to instrumental criteria, the identity of social quality is projected. The articulation is created through what one wants to expel from the battlefield. Furthermore, it is thorough the reduction of the Other to the discourse of the market, the business people, the technocracy, that the discourse of social quality is potentialized and is established as a democratic possibility: the collective construction of all, the workers.

Social quality is translated in the offer of school education and other modes of education for all, with standards of excellence and adequacy to the interests of the majority of the population. One consequence is the social inclusion, by means of which all Brazilians become apt to the questioning, the problematization, the decision making, searching for possible and necessary collective solutions for the resolution of the problems of each one and the community where one lives and works. What defines such quality is the school community, the experts and scholars, the workers, the whole society involved the formative process. It is exactly the practice of collective construction that has differentiated us from other governments, especially from the current federal government and its utilitarian concepts (Partido dos Trabalhadores, 2002, p. 8-9).

The adjective *social* is tied, thus, to that which is for all (the *majority of the population, the whole society, the collective*) aiming to restrict the adjective *total* to that which is for few – the privileged ones who benefit from social exclusion, from school without quality. Both discourses – *quality aimed at being total* and *social quality* – are consolidated because they are extended, they produce equivalences between multiple constituted demands. It is not possible anymore to claim that there is a discourse to the business people and another one to the work-

ers, fixing such groups in terms of identity. To identify the social actors who are subjected by these discourses is a contextual task that depends on the study of the political articulations imbricated in the process and of the meanings that are mobilized when one defends quality: social groups do not produce discourses, discourses forge the groups in which the multiple social actors are subjected (Laclau, 2005). To claim that a given social group is linked to a discourse is more a rhetorical strategy, capable of advancing the antagonism to this discourse and the creation of equivalences among the critical demands to it, than an analysis of the processes of subjectivation produced by this discourse.

We defend, thus, that two chains of equivalence are constituted: one between the curricular demands aimed at what has been characterized as objective goals of inclusion and learning, and another one, between curricular demands that, without disregarding the inclusion goals, aim at projecting the knowledge as associated to the recognized causes of the critical perspective in education and in curriculum. For such, this second chain of equivalences projects the quality as social and attempts, by the insertion of the adjective, to expel the instrumental meanings linked to the first enunciated chain, in which the projects reduced to the objectivist approaches would be.

In the case of the first chain of equivalences, the meanings of quality tend to be fixed to the instructional goals intended to be accurate. Quality is meant by means of mechanisms that attempt to control the school knowledge and becomes a set of indexes, based on unquestionable presupposed diagnostics. A discourse is constituted aiming at its universalization, introducing the dynamics of being necessary for the development of the country, of the society as a whole, for the common good. Included in the same chain are, for example, demands of those who search for jobs, social mobility, and see such possibilities as connected to the reaching of the instituted instructional parameters. The meanings of the job market preparedness and the meanings of the search for employability become equivalents for the fluctuation of signifiers like efficiency, common good, and development.

On the other hand, in the case of the second chain of equivalences – concerning social quality –, the increasing popular mobilization agglutinated by demands of the groups that aimed at taking the Workers Party to the Presidency of the Republic, succumbed – and still succumbs – to the indetermination and the imprecision of traditional causes.

Social quality implies to provide school education with standards of excellence and adequacy to the interests of the majority of the population. In order to be reached, such objective demands a great effort from society and each one, considering the difficulties imposed by current conjuncture. According to this perspective, basic values to be elaborated are: solidarity, justice, honesty, autonomy, freedom, and citizenship (CONED, 1997, p. 10).

Such fluctuation of meanings is not developed by an error of calculation, by a mistake, but by the political (language) game characterized by the excess of signification and, thus, by the emptying of the signifier that warrants the intended articulation. In the fight for hegemony, the articulatory processes make that the quality loses its relation with precise and concrete contents, becoming able to subvert the structure of the sign (Laclau, 2005; 2011). As any discourse with universalizing pretensions, in both chains of equivalences the contingent marks of the interests of the institutions and social actors involved in its constitution are blurred (Laclau, 2011).

The political game, however, does not cease by the occupation of positions of at Executive branch, and other articulations around the project of education quality are made, as the configuration of the government groups and social relations is changed.

### **Demands of a Quality of Education Project**

Promoting the quality of education is the central objective of the educational policy in the period 2003-2012, constituting such quality as a right (Brasil, 2009c; 2009a; 2009b; 2006c; 2010) that must be assured (Brasil, 2009c; 2009b; 2011; 2009a; 2006b; 2006c) and warranted (Brasil, 2009c; 2009b; 2010; 2007c; 2009d; 2011) by the State and schools. The desired quality education is planned for all (Brasil, 2009c; 2009b; 2009d; 2007a; 2011; 2010; 2007c), but is not restricted to school access. It presupposes that those who had access will stay and finish each stage of schooling with quality (Brasil, 2009c; 2009b) that implies that the necessary conditions to learning are guaranteed for all.

The fostering of quality *follows* the economic growth that Brazil has been experiencing during these governments and aims at supporting the cycle of development of the country (Brasil, 2011). The economic development brings along new demands and “education, without doubt, is in the center of this question” (Brasil, 2011, p. 1), as a challenge to be overcome (Brasil, 2004a; 2006a; 2003) and, at the same time, as an achievement (Brasil, 2011; 2010). The proposed quality education would trickle-down improvements as an effect, something that tends to be summarized in the following equation: a better/higher quality of education results in higher development of students (Brasil, 2006c) and, consequently, in greater/higher development of the country, so that it is possible to leap towards the future (Brasil, 2011).

The school of quality, as possibility of access of all to knowledge, is considered as “[...] crucial for creating real possibilities for social transformation” (Brasil, 2011, p. 25). The claim is that quality education really plays an important role “[...] in the process of social mobility and overcoming of the divisions of the Brazilian society” (Brasil, 2008c, p. 110). Education is considered as an essential condition of inclusion and democratization of opportunities in the country (Brasil, 2006a).



The ideals of social transformation encompass a myriad of social, political, and economic demands that pass through the reduction of the poverty (Brasil, 2009c; 2009b), “[...] reduction of structural socio-economic inequalities” (Brasil, 2008c, p. 111), construction of a society that is more just, solidary, and egalitarian (Brasil, 2009c; 2009b), economic development and sustainability of the country; consolidation of people’s citizenship (Brasil, 2006a), “construction of an ethical, just, free, and democratic Brazil” (Brasil, 2009d, p. 60).

This project of quality comes from the articulation of social and educational demands. By social demands we understand those that are linked to a project of society that aims to be made real by means of quality education. Social demands are linked to the construction of a more just society. Social justice is a demand that is linked to the end of social inequalities, to social inclusion, the respect to cultural diversity, and to reduction of the poverty.

Educational demands are those that are linked to teaching issues, the intended improvements in the pedagogical scope and that characterize what is understood as a quality teaching. The main educational demands are the promotion of an effective learning on part of the students, the access and the permanence of all in schools, the reduction of the distortion grade-age, the elimination of school failure, the equality of access to knowledge for all, the equity of opportunities of education and the classification of all in the IDEB (Index of Basic Education Development) at grade 6.0 or more<sup>8</sup>.

Educational and social demands are interrelated, being signified in a relation of cause and effect: educational demands, when satisfied, will produce the necessary conditions to the satisfaction of social demands. “The educational system must have as its goal the promotion of the better levels of school attendance of its population, enabling them to act in a critical and responsible way in the construction of a society that is more just, democratic, and developed” (Brasil, 2004a, P. 27). The cause-effect relationship between social and educational demands is constructed both by inclusion of quality education in the agenda of the country’s development and by the creation of discursive formations that make it possible.

In the program of Lula’s first campaign to the Presidency, education is taken as “[...] an essential tool for the development and the competitive insertion of any nation in the world” (Partido dos Trabalhadores, 2002, p. 37). In the subsequent program, Lula’s previous term was defined as one generating “development with income distribution and quality education” (Partido dos Trabalhadores, 2007, p. 5), a “[...] long term development, with reduction of social and regional inequalities, [...] emphasis on education [...]” (Partido dos Trabalhadores, 2007, p. 7). The same tone remained in Dilma Rousseff’s government plan, in the seventh of the thirteen announced commitments: “To guarantee edu-

cation for social equality, citizenship, and development” (Partido dos Trabalhadores, 2010, p. 7).

It is interesting to notice that the other way around is not emphasized in the government curricular documents and programs. We do not see an argument claiming that the response to social demands stimulates the response to educational demands, or that a more just society is able to create the conditions for instituting quality education. In the constructed translation, the bonds between educational quality and social development are potentialized by the bonds between educational quality and curriculum/school knowledge quality. The discourse of curriculum quality, in its turn, is constituted by the articulation between the previously antagonistic discourses: *social quality* discourse and *quality aimed at being total* discourse, in an equivalence pedagogically guaranteed by the meanings assigned to knowledge.

### Articulation Between Different Equivalence Chains of Quality

In current curricular documents, the discourse of *social quality* of education is anchored in the triad *access/permanence/success* of the student in the school, being signified as a demand of *all* and for *all* by means of its connection to the struggles of social movements. Around this triad an appeal is made to a compromise and a collective mobilization, aiming at “[...] schooling committed to knowledge access equality for all and, especially, engaged in guaranteeing this access to society’s disadvantaged groups in the population” (Brasil, 2009, p. 49).

The signifiers carry traces of social movements demands, by the focus “[...] on the citizenship and the dignity of the person, which imply equality, freedom, plurality, diversity, respect, social justice, solidarity, and sustainability” (Brasil, 2010, p. 11), but also traces of instructional demands. The school knowledge linked to the disciplines are what guides the outcome-centered evaluations.

The excessive concern with the results of these tests, without greater attention to the processes by which learning occurs, also ends up overshadowing highly valued aspects in the proposals of schooling that are not measurable as, for example, autonomy, solidarity, political commitment, and citizenship, in addition to the teaching of History and Geography and the development of the different fields of expression (Brasil, 2009c, p. 62).

The document legitimizes itself is supported by a vision of curriculum centered in the student, the knowledge and in his learning. The school with a social quality curriculum must be based in principles,

[...] guided by the freedom to learn, to teach, to research, and to spread the culture, the thought, the art, and the

scientific knowledge, in addition to the pluralism of ideas and pedagogical conceptions, as well as the valuing of extra-school experiences, and the connection between schooling, work, and social practices (Brasil, 2010, p. 19).

The common national base, and the knowledge in it, is highlighted. Other dimensions of culture are mentioned, but the prevailing reading is that culture is a repertoire of contents. School contents, linked to the disciplines currently present in schools, are what is enunciated as able to guarantee social quality.

School knowledge that, for requirement of citizenship, have *mandatory character*, according to the article 26 of the LDB/96, are those related to the understanding of the physical and natural world and of the social and political reality, with prominence of the contemporary social and political life and the history of Brazil; the study of mathematics; the acquisition of expression and communication abilities, and the development of languages, that demand the domain of the Portuguese language, and the different artistic manifestations and body practices (Brasil, 2009, p. 65).

Evaluation is advocated as able to contribute for the improvement of educational quality (Brasil, 2009d), being necessary the establishment of a mechanism “[...] to follow up the evolution of the work developed in schools, thus preventing a late diagnostic of low levels of literacy” (Brasil, 2008b, p. 5). The processes of national evaluation that compound the SAEB are conceived as a way of collaborating for the improvement of educational quality (Brasil, 2003; 201 2009c; 2005; 2004b; 2009b).

The quality of the content learned in schools is verified by means of evaluations to measure the competences and the abilities developed by the students. The process is similar to what teachers do to evaluate whether their students have learned or not a certain subject. The National System of Evaluation of the Basic Education (SAEB) presents tests of abilities and competences constructed by specialists in each field, using the most advanced statistical techniques to diagnose the educational level of certain school grades (Brasil, 2004b, p. 11).

The quality must be judged by criteria through which the institutions will be evaluated (Brasil, 2009e). Such criteria are related to the adoption of a minimum standard of quality to be guaranteed by the State to all, a standard that is linked to the idea of equalization of opportunities (Brasil, 2006b), as well as to the creation of a proper environment for learning.

Introducing in the schools a quality standard that transcends governments and the dynamics of power alternation, and that con-

siders the specificities of K-12 education (Brasil, 2009d) is considered a challenge and, in this sense, two paths for action are offered: financial investment and curriculum (Brasil, 2010). The parameters, in the aforementioned policy, are standards of reference for supervision, social control, and evaluation of education and for the redirection of the work in each teaching institution and system (Brasil, 2006b), aiming at “[...] improving the efficiency and guaranteeing the universalization of quality in the offer of education” (Brasil, 2006b, p. 22).

Some documents point to the definition of quality indicators, based on these parameters, as a desired result. The indicators aim at translating and detailing the parameters of quality in operational indicators. They are “[...] signals that reveal aspects of a certain reality and that can qualify something” (Brasil, 2009e, p. 15), providing “[...] a picture that makes it possible to identify what goes well and what does not” (Brasil, 2009e, p. 15). Parameters are materialized in the measurable indicators (Brasil, 2006c) and belong to the order of the concrete, the practice (Brasil, 2009e).

Under the scope of the K-12 education, the IDEB (Index of Basic Education Development) is an example of indicator that certifies the quality of the education being offered, having as a base of calculation both the data collected by INEP by means of the SAEB, and the data collected by the school census (Brasil, 2003; 2009c). The IDEB is presented as a *thermometer* of the educational quality and is associated to the actions of measuring, assessing, and evaluating. At the same time, it is an indicator that allows for comparison and classification of the results. It is a measurement of knowledge and social accountability.

The Ideb [Index of Development of the Basic Education] is one of the centers of the PDE [Plan of Development of the Education], one that allows a transparent accountability for society of how is education in our schools. Thus, evaluation is the first concrete action of adherence to the goals of the commitment [to education] and to receiving the technical / financial support from MEC [Ministry of Education], so that the Brazilian education gives a quality leap (Brasil, 2008a, p. 4).

National evaluation is understood as capable of subsidizing the planning of public policies (Brasil, 2003; 2004b; 2008a), and “[...] to contribute for the development, in all educational levels, of an evaluative culture that stimulates the improvement of the standards of quality and equity of Brazilian education and the adequate social controls of its results” (Brasil, 2005, p. 17), as well as to advance the reflection “[...] on the progress of the country and its social and economic development” (Brasil, 2004b, p. 42).

In the scope of this policy of quality evaluation, one can identify the fear that the schools will focus their work only on what is being

evaluated in external tests, producing the reversal of references for the pedagogical work: abdication of their curriculum proposals for a sole focus on the results and standards established by the national examinations. "Thus, the evaluation ceases to be part of the curriculum development and takes its place in the educational process" (Brasil, 2009c, p. 62). Evaluation must "[...] consider the extrinsic or extra-school dimensions that permeate such thematic" (Brasil, 2007c, p. 15), as well as not losing the sight of "the importance, in this process, of the dimensions that occur in the intra-school scope" (Brasil, 2007c, p. 20), as "[...] the quality of education is not solely measured by students results in the learning tests" (Brasil, 2006c, p. 20). Quality is made possible, among others ways, by establishing parameters or curricular guidelines (Brasil, 2010), being the quality curriculum the one that presents the selection of relevant and significant knowledge.

We claim that educational quality, as the one that we advocate, requires the selection of relevant knowledge that stimulate individual and social changes, as well as forms of organization and distribution of school knowledge that make its grasping and its critique possible. Such processes necessarily imply a dialogue with disciplinary knowledge, as well as with other socially produced knowledge (Brasil, 2007a, p. 21).

Disciplinary knowledge is added and at the same time distinguished from *other knowledge*, the knowledge that seem to be linked to social diversity, where restriction to the possibility of expression of difference seems to be present. Conflict and contestation between distinct knowledge are not enunciated, as if it were possible to separate knowledge, categorize it in segments, and erase the contingency that constitutes it.

Simultaneously, the idea of a quality curriculum as the one that prepares for the *vestibular*, for entering the university and the corporations, for approval in rigid processes of selection which criteria of merit and success are important, is refuted (Brasil, 2007b). Similarly, the single version curriculum is criticized, allegedly for being something idealized for a minority that will succeed and that, consequently, disregards the inequalities of conditions among the students. We also see the broad questioning of the evaluative practice centered in outcomes. Nevertheless, such critique does not seem to destabilize the hegemony around the discourses that strengthen the idea of a centralized curriculum. It seems to be affected by an impossibility of acting differently and by its distancing from the desired social transformation, the project of social justice distribution.

Regretfully, these problematizations have not indicated any alternatives for the improvement of national evaluations. As we know, the ENEM and Prova Brasil [national

tests] have been constituted as State policies that subsidize the educational systems in the formulation of public policies of equity, as well as providing elements to the cities and schools to locate their weaknesses and to promote actions, in the attempt to overcome them, by means of integrated goals. Moreover, the CNE [National Education Council] has proposed the establishment of a National Common Basis that will, as one of its objectives, guide the evaluations and the elaboration of textbooks and other pedagogical documents (Brasil, 2010, p. 7).

The outcome-centered evaluative practices multiply in all the levels of schooling and a discourse that denaturalizes its effect is not created. As it was pointed out by Matheus and Lopes (2012), the ideas of efficiency and efficacy that one searched to expel in the construction of the meaning of social quality return to the process of signification in the definition of the instruments and indicators of evaluation of content learning present in the national curriculum. The national evaluations are, in the same way, constituting the discourse that teaching has to be efficacious: the efficacy of teaching will be evidenced in the results of acquisition of contents and competences identified in such examinations.

It seems important to us, presently, to investigate which are the discursive processes that lead these projects of quality, in one hand linked to values understood as social and, on the other, to values signified as emanating from the market, to end up articulating themselves in their dispute to the representation of the universal. Considering that curricular texts are produced as attempts of fixating a particular discursive signification of the curriculum, what is that favors its hybrid constitution, aiming at the promotion of the desired educational quality? What is that potentializes the emptiness of the signifier *quality* in the current policies of curriculum?

It would be possible to argue that there was a misappropriation that misrepresents the discourse of social quality of education. It seems to us, however, that such an argument would simplify a complex and multifaceted political process. It is feature of a political text to be ambiguous, sometimes incoherent and inconsistent, as a result of the articulations that are necessary to its political constitution and, as all texts, it suffers the addition and the corrosion intrinsic to a translation, supplementing, in an endless way, meanings supposed as original.

We are interested in understanding, from a pedagogical point of view, which elements of these discourses favor its articulation in present times and which meanings are blocked by this articulation. We have opted for claiming that both discourses, previously constructed in an antagonistic way, have their articulation facilitated because they have in common an educational imaginary able to restrict curriculum to teaching and instruction, producing equivalence between relevant knowledge and measurable knowledge.

The current curricular proposals do not invent new ways to conceive the curriculum. They restrict themselves to an objectivist conception of knowledge, making the articulation between the discourse of distribution of this knowledge in an egalitarian way, understood as able to produce social quality of education, and the discourse of guaranteed access to knowledge, also disseminated by the discourses of the quality aimed at being total possible. Thus, there is equivalence between meanings of knowledge that favors a hegemony of a centralized curriculum policy and its modes of evaluation, articulating something that, in the 1990's, many of us perhaps have judged impossible to be articulated.

## Conclusions

In the case of the curriculum policy being analyzed here, the signifier *quality* represents both demands for a curriculum aimed at the egalitarian distribution of knowledge as demands for measurement of results stipulated in terms of the learned curriculum. Knowledge, for different purposes, tends to be objectified in both the antagonistic equivalence chains - social quality and quality aimed at being total. In the discourse of social quality, knowledge is considered essential to make the conditions of teaching more egalitarian for those who have access to education and, consequently, to promote social justice. The development of the student in the school is, therefore, tied to the nation's social development, at the same time that it acquires traces of the critical perspective of curriculum, in which the signifier *knowledge* carries the meanings of emancipation, human liberation, and social critique. In the discourse of the *quality aimed at being total*, the knowledge is important to guarantee that education delivers the instructional levels supposed as necessary to the professional and social development, equating the purposes of the individual, of the market, and of the nation. Thus, it is possible to identify instrumental perspectives of the curriculum, in which social efficiency seems to be guaranteed by focusing on the outcomes of student learning.

In both discourses, knowledge becomes an external object to the subject (Macedo, 2012), to be acquired in the schooling process. The educational process assumes the purpose of instructing, distributing knowledge, especially disciplinary one, guaranteeing access to legitimated knowledge, with objectivist and realistic traces. Knowledge is separated from social dynamics of cultural production associated to curriculum and fixed to subject positions: historically constructed knowledge, disciplinary knowledge, grassroots knowledge (Lopes, 2012).

This equivalence between meanings of knowledge favors the hybridization of the meanings of *social quality*, a cause raised by social movements, with the meanings of *quality aimed at being total*, linked to the market logic and the global society. In the name of a more just soci-

ety, it seem to be possible to control curriculum by means of large scale evaluations, as well as to measure the quality of educational processes by precise indicators, to spread out the knowledge able to reach the intended purposes, the purposes of *all*. Traces of critical perspectives and instrumental perspectives resound in these texts and turn knowledge into a powerful exchange currency in the educational process.

In a paradoxical way, the demand for social justice also marks the attempt not to associate this policy exclusively to the demands of education for an economically productive life, for a given efficiency in the professional performance, a mere way of having a return in the educational investments. Multiple meanings float in the signifier *social justice* - job, income, success, tuning with the world in change, critical conscience, reduction of the economic and social inequality, social mobility, social transformation, democratization of opportunities, inclusion, economic development of the country. The school knowledge is the lever of this (new) social project. The reification of knowledge and the reduction of curriculum to teaching purposes remain in an pedagogical imaginary that connects, in a deterministic way, education and social development, making it possible to articulate discourses of quality.

We advocate that such way of interpreting knowledge – something to be distributed, something that is known by history (critical) or science (disciplinary), something objective to the point of being able to be clearly measured, something that is disconnected of the possibilities of cultural translation in the realm of school and the processes of subjectivation – has been shaping the curriculum policies and contributing to make the project of curriculum centrality hegemonic. The instituted ways of interpreting tend to block other curricular possibilities, other possible readings, something that contributes to the understanding of the current policies as inexorable, the only possible ontology, instead of it being understood as produced by acts of power.

The question related to the antagonism that guarantees such equivalence between meanings of knowledge of social projects that are so distinct remains. Our hypothesis is that the antagonistic projects of quality end up articulating themselves at current times because they put themselves in the position of fighting the social processes considered to be blocking the development of the country, being one of them education without quality. Education without quality is thus a threat to the development of the country, and the development is the way to guarantee the international competitiveness to face the external threat to the project of social justice. Development, social justice, and quality become signifiers increasingly blurred, in which multiple meanings slide and, with this imprecision, they guarantee, in a conflicting way, the articulation of those who propose to distribute knowledge for all, many of whom are not articulated in other social projects.

What is sedimented, however, never is so forever. No matter how solid the structures with which we interpret (read) the political textu-



ality, it is always possible to deconstruct them, to present other possibilities of reading. We will always live in this paradox: doing politics implies to dislocate structures, is an act of breaking away with one knows, knowing, at the same time, that one only thinks with what one knows (or one thinks one knows). It seems to us that constructing other pedagogic imaginaries depends on displacements of what is sedimented. This text is a gamble in this possibility.

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## Notes

1 Documents produced or commissioned by the Ministry of Education, by means of the National Council of Education, the Secretariat of Basic Education, and the INEP, which deal with K-12 Education, were used. The organization of the texts and the search for signifiers were carried through by means of the program Wordsmith Tools, even though the logic of the analysis has not been based on this program.

2 Congress organized by the National Confederation of Workers in Education (CNTE) <<http://www.cnte.org.br>>

3 See, for example, Moreira (1995; 1996; 1997), Silva; Gentili (1996; 1997).

4 By this, we are not claiming that there is an identity between the two governments; there are differences in many fields, including the economic one. We underline here the marked continuity with respect to the curriculum policies, in the direction previously pointed by Lopes (2004).

5 See article published in O Globo, newspaper from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in May 23, 2012, <<http://oglobo.globo.com/educacao/projeto-do-mec-quer-unificar-curriculo-das-escolas-no-pais-3549446>>. Access in: May 23, 2012.

6 To see examples of critique made to this discourse during the 1990's, we suggest Silva; Gentili (1996, 1997).

7 The movement *All for education*, created in 2006, in Brazil, presents itself as “[...] a movement financed exclusively by private initiative, that congregates organized civil society, educators, and public managers who have as their objective to contribute so that Brazil guarantees to all the children and young people the right to quality k-12 education” (<<http://www.todospelaeducacao.org.br>>, Access in: May 10, 2012). This movement is funded by the following institutions and companies: Banco Santander, DPaschoal, Instituto Unibanco, Fundação Itaú Social, Gerdau, Instituto Camargo Correa, Fundação Bradesco, Suzano Papel e Celulose, Itaú BBA, and Faber Castell. Several other companies and institutions act as partners and supporters. For further details, see: <<http://www.todospelaeducacao.org.br/institucional/quem-esta-conosco/>>.

8 On the basis of examinations applied to the students of K-12 Education, the levels of learning of these same pupils are verified and quantified. The 6.0 grading is established as the minimum goal in a scale of 0 to 10.

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