

Plan de Estudio 2022:
A Curriculum Commentary¹

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“In Latin America today,” Raquel Glazman-Nowalski wrote in her contribution to *Curriculum Studies in Mexico*,² “most educational research is deeply rooted in reading. The scholar’s analysis is thus established as a basic work source.”³ My research, too, is “deeply rooted in reading,” on this occasion my reading of the 2022 Study Plan issued by *Secretaría de Educación Pública* (hereafter designated simply the SEP). As Frida Díaz Barriga Arceo explains: “What predominates as ‘curriculum’ [in Mexico] are academic study plans, reflecting an emphasis on formal curricular products and structures, models and proposals, all designed to support innovations in teaching.”⁴ Arceo added that “the concept of curriculum is characterized by its polysemic character, ... it is a theme open to controversy.”⁵ My curriculum commentary may also prompt controversy. Brooke/

When, on last September 14 [2022], Professor Israel Moreno invited me to speak with you,⁶ he explained that the “2022 curricular reform mandates that individual schools co-design their curriculum, led by a series of principles and guidelines established by the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* (SEP).” In a subsequent email – dated November 22 – and in response to my query concerning “co-design,” Professor Moreno called my attention to pages 170 and 171 of the Study Plan, an English-language version of which he kindly provided. On page 170 I read that “the local work of the teaching staff and the work of the School Technical Councils” constitutes a “process of textualization of national content,” providing “spaces for curriculum co-design at the school level to incorporate local and regional problems, themes and community issues as

necessary content to enrich the curricular proposal.”⁷ This “co-design process” is graphed on page 171.

After having studied the Plan, I conclude that “co-design” could be an accurate characterization only if teachers were equal partners in what the Plan terms the “problematization of reality,” a fine phrasing but not new, as Angel Díaz Barriga notes in his historical study, i.e. that decades ago in Mexico “transforming social reality became the objective of academic study.”⁸ Contradicting this call for “co-design” in Study Plan 2022 is the hierarchical relationship between the SEP and local schools – the “Mexican educational system was (and remains) highly centralized,”⁹ Barriga observed; in Study Plan 2022 this relationship has not been “transformed,” only rearticulated, albeit in sophisticated often inspiring language that nonetheless pre-empts teachers’ professional autonomy, and that despite regular references to teachers’ professional autonomy. But I get ahead of myself: my critique follows my praise, my commentary concluding with what I hope will be an interesting idea from ninety years ago, a curriculum experiment allowing educators to be free from any external dictation of the courses they chose to teach.

In Praise of the Plan

A more intellectually impressive curriculum policy I am unsure I have ever seen. Even in the passages I will quote – I will quote extensively – there is considerable sophistication, enviable by any country considering curriculum reform. Especially I appreciate the Plan’s emphasis upon “the historical,” an acknowledgement that each of us is a “being in history,” depicted (more expansively) as “the encounter of social, cultural, economic, anthropological or school realities, which make it possible for teachers and students to give meaning to the actions

they carry out in their daily lives.” In this era of presentism, narcissism and intensifying technologization – I suggest the three cultural crises are reciprocally related¹⁰ – History becomes, arguably, knowledge of most worth.¹¹

I appreciate the Plan’s characterization of reading – education as the “formation of readers” – as providing “a symbolic thickness, a poetics that allows us to imagine, dream and associate.” Here we’re describing not reading Twitter or endless email but imaginative literature – novels, short stories, poetry – for me the most important subjects after History in our unreal era of virtuality. I applaud the Plan’s endorsement of the arts, noting that the arts “offer students the possibility of creating relationships with the world that take into account reflective and affective aspects,” noting that the arts constitute “other forms of communication,” including “imagining and wondering about what can be,” that they enable us to recognize our “inner landscape.” But the Plan risks overreach when it asserts that the arts offer us “a better relationship with the community based on sensitivity, plurality and the exercise of critical thinking,” an enviable social consequence made even more explicit when we read: “In most cases, aesthetic experiences through the arts also favor ethical formation by contributing to the creation of free, tolerant and sensitive citizens in the face of the diverse cultural manifestations offered in the environment.” Aside from promising too much, the Plan (perhaps inadvertently) is setting up the arts to disappoint when – inevitably - they don’t materialize these utopic ideals. Moreover (again, perhaps inadvertently), these statements position the arts instrumentally, as a means to an end, ignoring the intrinsic significance of art, i.e. studying and doing art for art’s sake.

I admire the Plan’s insights concerning health, acknowledging that the concept can be “defined differently in time and space,” noting that once “normal” habits – like smoking – are now considered dangers to health, that even “homosexuality” was once considered

“pathological.” Also important is the Plan’s acknowledgement that we “are living in a geological era known ... as the Anthropocene,” that “the depredation and pollution of nature generated by the consumer society ... has put biological diversity and civilization at risk, with a direct effect on human health.” Yes - climate change concerns every aspect of life on earth, including our health, already taking a toll in increased deaths from heat waves, intensified storms, wild fires and drought. Surely climate science is also knowledge of most worth.

Laudable too is the Plan’s acknowledgement that the “evaluation of learning is part of the formative process and is found within the teacher-student pedagogical relationship and within the framework of a curriculum that integrates knowledge and know-how around the reality of the students,” characterizing “formative evaluation” as “an important act in educational work that allows students to reflect on their learning project.” I add that non-quantitative non-standardized forms of evaluation support such student reflection more precisely than their contraries.¹² Whatever form it takes, to be avoided is standardized evaluation, “underpinning everything”¹³ (as Arceo points out) in neoliberal curriculum reform.

I admire the reference to “subjective development,” if surprised at its being confined to the classroom. Yes, what we make of what others have made of us – “subjective development” - is “fundamentally related to the appropriation and innovative reconstruction of the cultural baggage resulting from the human historical processes,” but not only that which is “transmitted in the educational relationship.” Later, the Plan self-corrects, noting that students’ – may I add teachers’ – “learning should not only have meaning within the framework of the discipline,” or be restricted to “the classroom, but that it should be taken to other areas of their school and community life,” in service of “problematizing reality and thus strengthening the education of citizens who participate in the construction of a democratic society.” That last phrase –

“democratic society” – reminds us that the academic study of curriculum itself is associated with, if not prompted by, concerns for democratization. Speaking of the field’s history, José María García Garduño confirms: “There is no question that the development of the curriculum field was connected with the development of democracy.”¹⁴

Also admirable is the section on history of Mexico, where we learn that “it was the government's duty to racially merge the Mexican population, generalize the ideas of modern culture, and unify Spanish as the official language, indispensable elements to build the Mexican nation.” Later the Plan states that the “State is obliged to guarantee this right [to education] with a substantive emphasis on Afro-Mexicans, migrants, indigenous people, women, people of sexual and gender diversity, hospitalized children and adolescents, people with disabilities, as well as the poorest groups in society, especially street children and adolescents in conflict with the law, among others.” This apparent reversal reflects the tension between the divisiveness identity politics can create and the necessity of national unity many politicians profess. In your neighbors to the north – in both Canada and the United States – these tensions have been exploited politically, especially in U.S. states controlled by right-wing politicians, where legislation has been proposed and sometimes passed illegalizing the curricular inclusion of “critical race theory”¹⁵ and gender theory.¹⁶ In Florida, even mention of “climate change” has been legislated out of school curriculum.¹⁷

Of course Mexico is hardly alone in its utilization of language to homogenize cultural and racial difference, legislating one language as “official.” In the United States, as you know, efforts to legislate English only have not been so successful, as Spanish is spoken especially in the states bordering the Rio Grande (but hardly only there). Canada is a relative exception insofar as two

languages are official and there is considerable effort underway to protect, even promote, Indigenous languages, although probably never will these be deemed “official.”

Curriculum materials, we read, still “seek to reproduce the cultural, social and ethnic synthesis of the Mexican [state], but now in the context of economic globalization. This has meant the incorporation of new learning to exercise citizenship in the so-called global society of globalization.” In her historical study, Arceo recalls that in Mexico: “Curriculum came to the forefront once again, not only because it expresses educational ideals but also due to its characterization as the means to form the citizens that this new world order [globalization] demands.”¹⁸ There is, however, another form of citizenship that is not narrowly national or in service to the standardization globalization demands, citizenship associated with the concept of cosmopolitanism, an expansive (and sometimes controversial) concept in which, as José María García Garduño explains, more than citizenship is involved, as “cosmopolitanism means the opening of human beings, boundaries, and states,” a socio-psychological as well as civic sensibility that takes several forms, including “cultural, political, moral, and economic” cosmopolitanism.¹⁹ While not invoking the concept in the main text - although referencing Martha Nussbaum, one of the key theorists of cosmopolitanism in the U.S. - the Plan gestures toward cosmopolitanism when it suggests that “the fundamental issue is not the definition of the national curriculum that responds to the political, cultural and social project of the nation, but rather ... contents related to the global world.” In globalization the two are too often fused, but they need not be, as cosmopolitanism can be the call of curriculum focused inward, on the complicated often conflicted history of the nation itself.

Finally in my list of admirable elements – and this list, due to time constraints, is not complete - who could contest the long list of graduation outcomes, affirming dignity, diversity,

autonomy, the realization of one's cognitive, physical and affective potentialities, freedom from violence, reproductive and planetary health, digital literacy?²⁰ Each of these will be "incorporated into the curriculum." Really? Even as a set of inspirational aspirations for the future of humanity this list is far-fetched, but as expected outcomes of K-12 public education? Even the Church – with God on its side – can't accomplish all this, let alone an underfunded overcrowded public school system.

Critique

With that last line you see I'm entering the "Critique" section. While theoretically sophisticated, the Plan is also a political document, a fact of which we're reminded when we read "the school is a space where national unity is articulated *from* its diversity, where sciences, universal culture, ancestral cultures, languages, values, knowledge, customs, classes, genders and identities of all those who attend this *universal space of socialization* are hosted and dialogued." Among the words that stand out are the preposition "from" and the phrase "universal space of socialization," both of which I have italicized. Acknowledging translation distortions, these italicized terms make explicit the nationalist nature of the Plan, specified in that phrase "national unity is articulated *from* its diversity," not unlike the U.S. metaphor of "melting pot" and in contrast to Canada's "salad" metaphor for multiculturalism. Note that the school is here depicted not as a site for the realization of one's cognitive, physical and affective potentialities – those, you recall, among the expected outcomes of the "new Mexican school," but, rather, as an all-encompassing "universal space of socialization," where what is diverse can be developed into what apparently is not: one unified nation.

This tension between diversity and unity, between particularity and universality, is also evident when we are told: “For the New Mexican School, no two schools are alike and none has an end in itself, but all of them are at the service of their communities and society as a whole, so that the school is understood as the fundamental space in which *equality* for all is built; equality as the potential of students to be able to learn, *emancipate* themselves and *transcend* their reality” (italics added). In the first phrase I read a welcome assertion that the school is no ivory tower, that it is service to its community, although I wouldn’t want to lose altogether the ancient insight that because learning is intrinsically important in and for itself, it can also occur in relative isolation from society. The great Canadian political theorist and theologian George Grant asserted that “education is itself the purpose of our existence.”²¹ Speaking of theology, is a quasi-theological term – transcend – included in the quoted passage above sacralizes children’s emancipation, that last term – emancipation - famously associated with U.S. President Abraham Lincoln’s freeing of the slaves. Stirring language but surely the writers of the Plan don’t intend students to “emancipate” themselves from school or to “transcend” the Plan. Equality before the law may be a *sine qua non* of democracy, but any teacher or parent knows children are not equal, not the same, however “socialized” authorities may want them to be.

At one point the Plan informs that: “This implies rethinking the universalist and nationalist character of knowledge, assuming diversity as a condition and starting point for learning processes based on *what is common* to all.” Despite a disavowal – “rethinking ... the nationalist character of knowledge” – we’ve read already that the Plan seeks national unity from diversity. The use of the civic and ecological term “commons” is repurposed as institutional, as the term “organization” (italicized in the quoted passage that follows) indicates: “The commons is expressed as an *organization* of educational and school processes inspired by principles of

mutual support and solidarity, anchored in the dialogue between students and teachers, among teachers, as well as among students. For this reason, the curricular dynamics of the school from the commons embraces the problematization of reality as a central strategy for dialogue, the integration of knowledge....” The repetition of this phrase “problematization of reality” – recalling earlier quasi-Marxist and specifically Freirean pedagogies of conscientization – confirms the cleverly incorporative character of the curriculum the document details: even discourses of resistance are rerouted – through “dialogue” - into the “New Mexican School” to support “the task of the State,” namely “to favor the transformation of education so that it may contribute to the construction of a democratic society,” a society not so democratic when diversity is diverted from its cultural and geographical specificities and fused into national unity.

Astonishing to read the Plan’s allegation that “multiculturalism is a racism that maintains differences from a distance based on the privilege of its universal position,” both because it overstates even sensationalizes an important insight – that multiculturalism presumes a standpoint outside (and implicitly superior to) the cultures it recognizes – but also because it contradicts that very point by decreeing that this “*Study Plan for Preschool, Elementary and Secondary Education*” is “applicable and mandatory for the entire Mexican Republic,” positioning it – and the SEP that issued it - in a “universal position.” The Plan ascribes multiculturalism’s maintenance of the “co-existence of the different ways of cultural life” as what is “demanded by globalization,” a point well taken if overstated as it ignores the processes of de-globalization now very much underway.²² Multiculturalism is replaced by something called “critical intercultural training,” the phrase reminding me of Alicia de Alba’s conception of “cultural contact,” a “space in which different discourses, language games, forms of life, ways of intelligibility and sensibility interact on the domains of the *different*,” thereby “transform[ing]

subjectivity and identity.”²³ Rather than occurring on the domains of the “different,” the Plan’s conception of “intercultural training” seems to trade on the same, cultivating “sensitive subjectivities capable of becoming indignant in the face of the violation of people's rights, in the face of all forms of violence and any type of discrimination, as well as taking concrete actions against any exclusion based on class, disability, sex, ethnicity and gender.” Discrimination is indeed intolerable, but the ongoing struggle against it must not compel conformity. Never mind that in the Plan’s phrasing the school is being set up to be the “fall guy” when these activist aspirations are not realized.

After decrying multiculturalism, the Plan appears to tolerate it, that in a section referencing “curricular reforms from 2004 to 2017,” asserting that “there is continuity with the 1992 reform; a reinforcement of the concept of quality, the incorporation of the concept of competencies as the guiding axis of the organization of learning, although the structure by learning objectives was maintained and a *multicultural approach is adopted* to address the linguistic diversity of indigenous peoples.” Of course the concept of “quality” in curriculum reform has been criticized – implying, as it does, that “quality” (and “competencies”) are absent in Mexican public education – and linked to the 1990s cultural, political, and economic intrusion of such international financial organizations such as the World Bank, the Inter-American Bank of Development, and UNESCO, as Angel Díaz Barriga documents in his invaluable history of curriculum studies in Mexico; he writes:

Emphasizing the discourse of ‘quality,’ which the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) would also employ by the middle of the decade, these entities promoted a series of “reforms” focused on revising the evaluation of

education by instituting “performance objectives,” the achievement of which became associated with merit pay programs.²⁴

Controlling student behavior by means of manipulating teacher salaries was disguised as a demand for “quality.” Another Orwellian keyword of recent decades is “flexibility,” if in service to an inflexible end. “Flexibility,” Tirado explains, “is an inclusive phenomenon within a wider process: economic restructuring.”²⁵

In the Plan there is an acknowledgement of earlier policy errors when we read: “Against a curricular policy centered on an instrumental and utilitarian philosophy of knowledge, teachers have been the main subjects of society who have been able to maintain utopia, emancipation and hope for the future through the education of children and adolescents.” By this possibly patronizing praise the SEP positions itself above the fray – ah, that “universal position” from where one sees everything - even disdaining curriculum reform, lamenting that “the amount of curriculum content continues to increase with each reform, over and above its pertinence and relevance, incorporating politically correct discourses, but without impacting the structure, meaning and purpose of the content.” Despite the volume and political correctness of many issues it includes in this curriculum reform, presumably Plan 2022 is different.²⁶

The canonical curriculum question - what knowledge is of most worth? – is one reserved for the SEP only, confining teachers’ “professional autonomy” to “didactic practice,” so that the onus of student learning falls squarely – almost entirely – on their shoulders. Despite regular reference to teachers’ “professional autonomy” – a prerequisite for teaching, as (quoting Tirado) “the teacher is fundamental in understanding the existing culture and its social problems”²⁷ - it is clear that such “autonomy” is, in this Plan, confined to sphere of teachers’ “didactic practice,” driven by “their commitment to make effective the human right to education of children and

adolescents.” Children and adolescents may enjoy the “human right to education,” but apparently teachers do not: I read no promise of paid study leaves or tuition reimbursement for further academic study and certainly no assurance of the co-design of the curriculum, that latter item a prerequisite to providing (if always revising) educators’ answers to the canonical curriculum question: what knowledge is of most worth?

Supporting the intellectual independence – surely the essence of professional autonomy – upon teacher educators is not in the Plan either; we read that the “purpose of teacher training is to create *bridges* between the knowledge proposed by the Plan and the Study Programs with the teaching knowledge developed in their initial training and throughout their professional performance” (italics added). The legendary Canadian curriculum theorist Tetsuo Aoki conceived of “bridge” not as a means to travel between two points – in the quoted passage from the Plan to practice – but as a “zone between two curriculum worlds: the worlds of curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived-experience,”²⁸ a creative zone where the educator exercises her or his professional autonomy, deciding what to say and do next. In contrast to Aoki’s affirmation of academic freedom, the Plan positions teacher educators – and classroom teachers – in a space where any creativity is confined to albeit creative implementation, not the independent “problematization” (to invoke the Plan’s term) of “reality.” This fact is confirmed when we learn that: “*Co-design does not avoid the compulsory observance* of preschool, primary and secondary school curricula, but within this framework it is necessary to move towards a contextualized, flexible and realistic vision of how teachers make decisions about how to teach in school” (italics added). Here the concept of “co-design” constitutes a cover-up for manipulation, no “new Mexican school” but the old one, redressed in different – admittedly often appealing – language.

Even the “School Technical Council” is commanded to make “the State's educational project effective.”

Declaring that “this curricular proposal, [is] under permanent construction” leaves open the SEP’s options to alter it while it positions teachers as construction workers, dangling aloft a high rise with little protective scaffolding below them. Yes, there is acknowledgement that the “sense of the human in education implies the recognition, care, protection and development of the dignity of children and adolescents,” but what about the dignity of educators? Inspiring is the Plan’s acknowledgement that the “main task of education in the New Mexican School is to enable children and youth, together with their teachers, to meet the humanity of others, understood in their diversity,” but one’s humanity includes thinking for oneself, enabling one “to meet the “humanity of others,” including one’s own humanity as educator. To “meet the humanity of others, understood in their diversity” requires, then, recognizing educators as individuals, namely, as Louis Lavelle knows,

to recognize in them that individual existence by which they resemble us and yet are different from us, that presence in them of a unique and irreplaceable individuality, of an initiative and a liberty, of a vocation which is their own and which we must help them to realize, instead of feeling jealous of it, or *seeking to bend it in the hopes of making it serve ours* (italics added).²⁹

Not educators as bridges or implementers of others’ ideas, but as “unique” and “irreplaceable” individuals capable of seeking – and teaching - knowledge of most worth.

Unique and irreplaceable individuals – erudite, ethical, intellectually engaged – can be capable of recreating curricula that address “children and adolescents [who] are historical subjects who live in specific territories and times whose condition makes it possible for them to

approach knowledge and self-care, within a daily life where they build their identity, the link with the community, the relationship with nature and the cultural, social, sexual, linguistic, ethnic, gender and capacity diversity that characterize the world in which they live.” How can curricula “direct educational action towards the realization and emancipation of students” when teachers are not also emancipated, including from the directives of the SEP? Of course, “it is essential that schools give priority to the opinion of children and adolescents on the rights of children and adolescents,” but is it not also “essential” that SEP accord priority to the professional judgements of teachers?

Acknowledging “reality,” the Plan alludes to “various types of violence in Mexican society,” but then downloads the state’s responsibility for ending endemic violence onto the school, declaring “it is an ethical and pedagogical imperative to promote an education that forms citizens, so that schools throughout the country build relationships for well-being and good treatment, based on a deep respect and appreciation for one's own dignity and that of others.” Of course, dignity for all, but isn’t ending violence the obligation of the state, in particular the police, not educators who already face challenges enough, including, according to the Plan, responsibility for “the construction of citizenship”?

Despite the empirical evidence – that for many maybe most K-12 students learning online during the pandemic meant learning less³⁰ – the Plan uncritically confirms the centrality of technology, dictating that: “It is essential that schools offer more and better spaces for reading, creation and appropriation of digital content.” Yes, there is an admonition that students must learn how to “make sense of what they see, read and hear” – a nod to the pervasive misinformation on the Internet – “but also generate and design new content,” I trust no complicity with U.S.-based technologies companies’ efforts to install coding in the secondary

school curriculum in the U.S., even at the expense of foreign language.³¹ All this in a “reflective attitude and in a creative way” – of course! There is no mention of technology’s – social media’s specifically – dangers to children, bullying, sexting, identity theft among these.

Despite endorsing “the integration of the curriculum” and acknowledging that “working a curriculum with formative fields implies the dismantling of a subject-based education,” the century-old school subject organization of the curriculum appears to remain in place. Students are to acquire “a solid scientific base, an adequate command of languages and appropriate oral and written expression skills, as well as the ability to understand what is read, and the progressive development of logical mathematical thinking; all this in coexistence with other knowledge, experiences and equally legitimate cultural, artistic and social traditions, which together can be approached through concrete themes or problems of life and not as separate ideas in units of information.” Provocative is the post-structuralist³² (if overstated) assertion that “the sciences are constructions, among many others, to explain physical reality, which in turn is conditioned by cultural and historical factors. As a cultural construct, it cannot be said to be superior to other knowledge systems,” this last statement an unwise assertion in an era of climate-change deniers and vaccine sceptics. Stipulating that the “learning of mathematics should have a human meaning for children and adolescents” is laudable but unlikely, unless mathematics informs curricular topics – say the coming demographic collapse in Russia, Germany, Italy, and China – rather than organized vocationally, that is, as reproducing in students those forms of “mathematical thinking” in which professional mathematicians engage.

Laudably the Plan points out: “Truly meaningful learning takes place when students perceive information from their immediate world in terms of their *personal project*, and the interaction of abstract, symbolic, material and affective content.” I italicize “personal project” to

emphasize the point that when curriculum is organized around the traditional school subjects – themselves often mirroring the university-based academic disciplines – both the “personal” and “project” are sidelined, as the project structuring the curriculum is competence in the school subject/academic discipline, not the understanding of the school subject as it informs understanding of one’s “personal project.” Of the course the educator can help, although again the Plan inflates the obligations of educators by asserting that the “role of didactics will be to organize the interaction between the study of a set of objects, problems, theories, from documents, stories, texts, themes, testimonies, etc., and a task to be performed in a real-life situation. The teaching and learning situations set by the teacher will be effective when the interaction between content and personal project makes sense to the students,” that last observation very well known by teachers even as they know that the great and ongoing pedagogical challenge is helping students see how “content” and “personal project” do indeed “make sense.”

In this Plan there seems a qualification of the pecuniary aims of STEM – their alignment with the (especially digital) economy – by linking these with the “concrete themes or problems of life.” Inspiring but overstated are the overall aims of the revised integrated curriculum, apparent in the following sentence, where we learn that

the integration of the curriculum contributes to giving meaning to the democratic life of schools, since it favors a construction of reality in which children, adolescents and adults appear as historical subjects, capable of approaching the world, interpreting it and contributing to its transformation from different perspectives. This favors a democratic construction of knowledge.

Really? How can students experience themselves as “historical subjects” without studying History, not STEM, as the central subject in the curriculum, and not necessarily “integrated” with other subjects? How exactly can the curriculum be engineered to produce such wide-ranging, laudable, humanity-transforming effects? Of course, it cannot: the scale of the school and the scale of human society do not coincide. Note too that educational engineering itself is not exactly “democratic” as it implies manipulation not collaboration or co-design or the cacophony “democratic” life necessarily is.

In the Plan we read that “the problematization of reality has the function of questioning the role of knowledge and know-how,” supporting “the incorporation of new forms of reasoning through creativity, systematic doubt and discovery,” but that “the most important thing is that students learn to construct the nature of a problem and its possible solutions.” Evidently “reality” being “problematized” doesn’t include questioning the primacy of “problem-solving,” itself a technocratic mind-set that ignores, or at least understates, the significance of politics, culture, the individual person, each sphere of which certainly includes “problems” to be “solved,” but none of which can be reduced to “problem-solving.” My allegation of “technocratic” thinking is also confirmed when I read that “a central aspect is that children and adolescents exercise their right to science and technology.” True, the absence of access to the latter during the pandemic was educationally catastrophic for hundreds of millions of children around the globe, but even for those children with access, learning suffered (as noted earlier), even for those who enjoyed parents sufficiently privileged to be able to pause their careers to stay home with their children during lock-downs. At least on standardized measures of learning – however misleading these are³³ - test scores have plummeted.³⁴

After affirming technocracy, the Plan suggests that “when children begin to study modernity and its historical, scientific, productive, technological, cultural and artistic processes, they are actually studying the processes of colonization and its domains, so it is essential that they understand how they relate to their daily lives,” an insight that can only be realized if the curriculum – and the teachers who participate in it – explicitly frame “modernity” as (only) “colonization” (what Arceo terms “satellization”³⁵), a totalizing and reductionistic conception of “modernity,” of which there are several nationalistically distinctive versions.³⁶ When students study economics, will they actually be studying that subject only as “land appropriation and human exploitation”? When they study politics, will they in fact focus on “the control of authorities,” including the “control of authorities” on display in this Plan? When they study the “social” will they in fact attend to “the control of gender, social class, sexuality, ethnic condition”? Will K-12 students in fact study epistemology, and as “the control of knowledge and subjectivities” in a curriculum that will “give visibility and credibility to the cognitive practices (in terms of teaching and learning) of peoples, classes and social groups that have been historically exploited, oppressed, excluded and rendered invisible by colonial thought”? Will the curriculum of “the new Mexican school” include analyses of “a Eurocentric, patriarchal and heterosexual vision of reality”? Including these conceptions – certainly I am in favor of doing so – in the curriculum is bound to place teachers in political jeopardy, at least in some localities. Will the SEP provide legal counsel?

Does the Plan’s affirmation of “critical thinking” include critiques of critical thinking? Or is “critical thinking” only directed elsewhere, conceived as “the capacity developed by children and adolescents to question the world and oppose injustice”? Can “critical thinking” enable students “to value knowledge, to seek it and love it, not for the benefits that can be obtained in

exchange for it, but for what it brings to give meaning to one's own life and to the community, especially to improve and enrich them"? Or will they critically question these inspiring aims as well, at least their downloading from adults to children and the teachers who work with them.

The contradictions continue when the Plan asserts that "the main role of the curriculum is to establish the conditions of freedom and professional autonomy of teachers so that, based on it, students and teachers define the central problems or topics they consider relevant to address *during the course....*" Suddenly teachers can choose content? Not exactly, as the prepositional phrase "during the course" (italics added in the quoted passage) reminds us that the "course" is ordained. There is "wiggle room" here, but not "freedom" or the "professional autonomy of teachers," as these two concepts would affirm teachers' right to teach *what courses* they deem appropriate (of course in consultation with others), *how* they deem appropriate (yes sensitive to specific children in their classrooms), including deciding how (even if) student coursework should be assessed.³⁷

The Eight-Year Study

Each of these issues was in play ninety years ago in an ambitious curriculum experiment undertaken in the United States. During the 1930s, the U.S.-based Progressive Education Association conducted a comprehensive study and field experiment with 30 U.S. schools – the Denver and Los Angeles school districts counting as one school each - known as the Eight-Year Study. For the duration of the eight-year experiment, these schools were freed from college and university admissions requirements, allowing educators and administrators to teach whatever knowledge they deemed of most worth, in whatever manner they deemed appropriate, assessing students' study however they deemed appropriate.³⁸ That professional autonomy – that

intellectual freedom to answer the canonical curriculum question: what knowledge is of most worth? - was conferred upon teachers because the Eight-Year Study was dedicated to constructing curricula that enabled students to understand – and more compassionately participate in - that “way of life we call democracy.”³⁹

Especially in the private schools that participated, what since 1916 had, in the United States, been termed “social studies”⁴⁰ predominated, but not only - the arts were emphasized as well. Despite this humanities-arts-centric curriculum, it turns out that the canonical curriculum question did not preoccupy teachers and their administrators. Instead, these two groups – plus parents - tended to focus less on the intellectual content and more on the organizational forms of the content took, among them the duration of class times, the titles and sequencing of courses, and – yes - assessment.⁴¹ Reflecting on the Study after its conclusion Wilford M. Aikin concluded: “The molds into which education was poured, rather than its essence and spirit, became the goals of pupils and parents.”⁴²

In the Eight-Year Study’s emphasis upon organization, on evaluation, course titles, and student record keeping, stakeholders reiterated the organizational emphasis that Aikin, reflecting on the experiment at its conclusion, associated with “traditional education.”⁴³ Emphasizing organizational over intellectual experimentation, the Eight-Year Study remains remarkable but also “disconcerting” as it privileged the institutional forms curriculum takes over its intellectual-emotional-social substance, in Aiken’s language, its “molds” over its “essence” and “spirit.”⁴⁴ Even when afforded an opportunity to answer in their own terms the curriculum question – what knowledge is of most worth? - on this occasion teachers and administrators remained wedded to the organizational character of the curriculum, more so than with its intellectual content.

To its considerable credit, Study Plan 2022 emphasizes intellectual content, if to a fault, taking almost “all the oxygen in the room” (so to speak), leaving teachers to grapple with “how” to articulate what the panoramic picture the Plan paints. If curriculum can contribute to democratization through experimentation, I suggest it does so less by reorganizing its institutional “molds” and more by the invigoration of the intellectual content of courses offered by animated, erudite, imaginative - professionally autonomous - teachers attentive to particular students in particular classes in particular schools.

Conclusion

The “problematization of reality” positions the “problematizer” outside “reality,” in principle an impossible positioning.⁴⁵ Despite this and other contradictions, Study Plan 2022 is laudable in its call for questioning what is the case, a call I am suggesting that includes questioning the Plan itself, impressive document that it is. My concern is not its theoretical sophistication but its tendency toward totalizing the curriculum, co-opting the very particularity it presumably supports. Moreover, the Plan risks downloading the obligations of other institutions of society – the state, the church, business, civic associations – onto the school, creating the political condition for scapegoating the schools – and educators - when they don’t pull off the miracles even our religious leaders have failed to pull off.

The opportunity the Eight-Year Study offered – wherein schools were cut free from any external dictation of what their curriculum must be - seems, in your (our) situation, simply surreal. In this theoretically sophisticated often admirable Study Plan teachers are in no sense co-designers, unless we think of teachers as the SEP’s “sous-chefs,” assistants in the kitchen. The menu has been prepared by others, so that those who problematize “reality” every school day

earn only an acknowledgement of “the regional, local, contextual and situational nature of the teaching and learning process.” Indeed, the Plan’s references to “professional autonomy” denote teachers’ obligation to “contextualize the contents of the study programs according to the social, territorial, cultural and educational reality of the students.” Finally, the Study Plan invokes the well-worn concept of “curricular integration” while at the same stipulating individual school subjects – STEM but (to its credit) also those associated with the arts and the humanities – even asserting that such an “interdisciplinary approach” constitutes “the problematization of reality.” I am suggesting that such a scale of educational envisioning – educational engineering itself - needs to be problematized as well. Despite its lofty language, Study Plan 2022 succumbs, in its positioning of teachers as educational engineers enacting its vision, to a form of technocratic rationality that, after all is said and done, requires me to share the conclusion of Frida Díaz Barriga Arceo:

[I] conclude that, in the majority of cases, curriculum development continues according to technocratic rationality.... Authoritarian educational practices continue, as does the psycho-pedagogical demand for structuring academic content according to the characteristics of students, and as per the most pressing social needs. This is the pending agenda for curriculum development in Mexico.⁴⁶

Over a decade ago, then, the prescient Professor Arceo not only saw through that present moment; she also foresaw the future as well.

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Endnotes

¹ In addition to the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, I presented this paper at the University of Texas RGV.

² That volume, like its companion volumes focused on curriculum studies in Brazil, China, India, and South Africa, registers the intellectual history of the nation-associated field through the lens of key senior scholars whose work helped comprise those very history of curriculum studies in Mexico. Presently I am working through the history of curriculum studies in Canada:

www.curriculumstudiesincanada.com

³ 2011, 166.

⁴ 2011, 75. Arceo (2011, 75-76) adds: "From the viewpoints of specialists, however, curriculum is much broader than the aims listed above. For curriculum specialists, the field is also concerned with curriculum development more broadly understood. It is concerned as well with

understanding curriculum, especially those social, political, and educative processes that inform it.”

⁵ Ibid. “Concerning the concept of curriculum,” Furlán (2011, 131) comments, “I think, finally, there is no need to be worried about its polysemy.”

⁶ “You” refers to those in attendance at the February 23rd presentation at the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California.

⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, all quoted passages come from the English-language version of the *Plan de Estudio 2022*.

⁸ 2011, 94. “For a time,” Angel Díaz Barriga (2011, 95) recalls, “the determination of transformational objectives replaced behavioral objectives.” That “social vision was not Anglo-Saxon but Latin American,” he adds (2011, 104), “a Latin American accomplishment, and a specifically Mexican one at that.”

⁹ 2011, 93.

¹⁰ Pinar 2023.

¹¹ Arceo (2011, 88), too, takes note of “students’ ignorance of history.”

¹² Historically, Angel Díaz Barriga (2011, 99) points out that: “Evaluation criteria emphasized measurement.... Whatever could not be measured was irrelevant.” Evidently there was “push-back,” as Glazman-Nowalski (2011, 175) reports: “In Mexico today, there is criticism of evaluation as the most important element of education, recognizing its function as control of every form of expression. Evaluation has become the administrative means to standardize subjects, processes, and forms of knowledge, rendering them no longer creative but routine processes, quantified and controlled by select groups.”

¹³ 2011, 77.

¹⁴ 2011, 148. Garduño adds: “The exile of curriculum experts delayed the process of creation of the curriculum field in Argentina. After several years in Mexico, several scholars returned to Argentina, among them Robert Follari. Others, such as Alfredo Furlán, live in Mexico, while maintaining close contact with their native country” (ibid.)

¹⁵ Romero (2022, November 4, A19) reports on an Oklahoma law banning schools from teaching material that could cause students discomfort or psychological stress due to their racial identification; Gov. Kevin Stitt signed the law as part of a wave of legislation against “critical race theory,” a phrase used by right-wing to describe what they see as efforts to include in the curriculum lessons about structural racism. Mazzei and Hartocollis (2023, January 20, A20) report that Florida will not allow a new Advanced Placement (A.P.) course on African American studies to be offered in its high schools, declaring – in a letter to the College Board which administers A.P. exams - that the course is not “historically accurate” and violates state law. The letter, with no name attached to it, failed to cite which law the course violated or what in the curriculum was objectionable. Last year, Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican, signed legislation that restricted how racism can be incorporated in the school curriculum.

¹⁶ Goldstein (2022, July 22, A11) reports that Heinemann, a division of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, will halt publication of the kindergarten through second-grade curriculum reading curriculum, known as “Units of Study,” following “conservative” laws restricting how race, gender and other identities can be taught. It is decision that could affect as many as a quarter of elementary schools in the United States. And it illustrates the “countervailing pressures facing educational publishers: on the one hand, right-wing legislation limiting the curriculum; on the other, pressure from progressive educators to produce material that deal more explicitly with race, gender and other forms of identity.” In Florida, right-wing legislation now authorizes

parents to sue school districts for violating such laws, and schools would have to reimburse parents for their litigation expenses.

¹⁷ Choi-Schagrin (2022, November 2, A12) reported that the right-wing-controlled Florida State Department of Education dropped “climate change” from the state’s middle or elementary-school education standards. Texas allows only three bullet points to climate change in its 27 pages of standards. More than 40 states allow only one explicit reference to climate change.

¹⁸ 2011, 83.

¹⁹ 2011, 142. In my study of the concept I focus on its absence (Pinar 2009).

²⁰ Outcomes include one’s “right to a dignified life, to decide about their bodies, to build their personal and collective identity, as well as to live with well-being and good treatment, within a framework of freedoms and responsibilities with themselves, as well as with their community,” to “recognize and value the ethnic, cultural, linguistic, sexual, political, social and gender diversity of the country as features that characterize the Mexican nation,” to “recognize that women and men are persons who enjoy the same rights, with the capacity for action, autonomy and decision to live a life of dignity, free from violence and discrimination,” to “value their cognitive, physical and affective potentialities from which they can improve their personal and community capabilities during the different stages of their lives,” that have learned to “develop their own way of thinking that they use to analyze and make reasoned judgments about their family, school, community, national and global reality; aware of the importance of the presence of other people in their lives and the urgency of opposing any kind of injustice, discrimination, racism or classism in any area of their lives,” that “they “perceive themselves as part of nature, conscious of the moment they are living in their life cycle and the importance of understanding that the environment and their personal lives are part of the same plot, so they understand the priority of relating the care of their food, their physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health with planetary health from a sustainable and compatible vision,” and that they have learned to “interpret historical, cultural, natural and social phenomena, facts and situations based on diverse topics and investigate to explain them based on reasoning, models, data, etc. and information with scientific foundations and community knowledge, in such a way as to allow them to consolidate their autonomy to pose and solve complex problems considering the context,” and they are able to “interact in dialogue processes with respect and appreciation for the diversity of capabilities, characteristics, conditions, needs, interests and visions when working cooperatively,” able to “acquire new skills, build new relationships and assume different roles in a process of constant change to undertake personal and collective projects in a rapidly changing world,” to “exchange ideas, worldviews and perspectives through different languages in order to establish agreements that respect their own ideas and those of others,” committed to “master basic communication skills both in their mother tongue and in other languages” as they “take advantage of the resources and media of digital culture, in an ethical and responsible way to communicate, as well as obtaining, selecting, organizing, analyzing and evaluating information,” all the while have developed “critical thinking that allows them to value the knowledge and wisdom of the sciences and humanities,” including “recognizing the importance of history and culture in critically examining their own ideas and the value of others' points of view as central elements in proposing transformations in their community from a holistic perspective.” An admirable even inspiring list but obviously out-of-reach, even if schools were not underfunded and overcrowded.

²¹ Quoted in Pinar 2019, 1.

²² <https://www.axios.com/2022/03/24/world-economy-deglobalization-future> There are those who predict Mexico will profit from de-globalization:
<https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-04-05/de-globalization-could-help-countries-like-mexico-make-up-ground-lost-to-china>

²³ 2011, 64.

²⁴ 2011, 99.

²⁵ 2011, 182. It was “in the 1990s,” Tirado adds, that “the relation between higher education and employment became one of the key recurring topics on every educational agenda.”

²⁶ Probably not, if Barriga’s (2011, 100) observation holds true today: “The economic imperative that has comprised educational reforms since the 1990s has been animated by ongoing pressure to continue to introduce ‘innovations,’ most of which have remained rhetorical.”

²⁷ 2011, 201.

²⁸ 2005 [1986], 159.

²⁹ 1993 (1939), 51.

³⁰ In the long section on the Covid-19 pandemic, during which there is an admirable critique of “informationalism” and decontextualized abstraction, the Plan points out that knowledge is the not equivalent of information nor are ideas “autonomous and independent objects,” misconceptions that “favored the conception of a curriculum based on separate units of information whose expression has been the so-called competencies or key learning, and has facilitated the use of digital platforms that operate in this format.” The critique goes further, pointing out that “this [discredited] curriculum approach responds to the vision of cognitive capitalism and the knowledge society, in which the exploitation of life cycles is done by reducing the subjects in training to mere units of information.” The consequence of such a curriculum is that “it is less important that children and adolescents learn things that are significant for their personal and collective life, since it is more valuable that during their life cycle they can be transformed through the investment made by the State or families into a commodity.” This insight seems undermined, however, when this unwelcome state-of-affairs is located solely in the past, blaming it for “the failure of schools to retain students during the pandemic.” (In the U.S. dropout rates – highly already – increased exponentially during the pandemic, that correlated – and conceived caused – by moving the curriculum online: see Fortin 2021.) Informationalism and abstraction characterize this report as well, as they do this presentation. Information and abstraction are hardly to be avoided – knowledge (which I take to include ethical judgment, attunement to others, even, on too-rare occasion, wisdom – but their commodification seems almost complete at this time (thanks to an omnivorous almost omnipresent capitalism), a time that demands, quoting the report again, “a change of epoch, perhaps a change of civilizational order that presents ... the possibility of rethinking education in a radically different way.” I concur, but “radical” rethinking requires contrarianism not conformism.

³¹ Singer (2017, June 7, A14) reports that Code.org, a major non-profit group financed with more than \$60 million from Silicon Valley companies, has committed itself to force every public school in the U.S. to teach computer science. Singer continues: “Code.org has barnstormed the country, pushing states to change education laws and fund computer science courses. It has also helped more than 120 districts to introduce such curriculums, the group said, and has facilitated training workshops for more than 57,000 teachers.”

³² I am thinking of Bruno Latour, whom I heard lecture to a hostile audience of scientists during autumn term 1995 at the University of Virginia.

³³ For the definitive defense of this allegation see Taubman 2009.

³⁴ Fawcett 2022, November 2, A1, A13.

³⁵ 2011, 78. “In was during the 1970s,” Díaz Barriga (2011, 91) specifies, that curriculum studies texts started to circulate in Mexico, all of them translations into Spanish of U.S. publications. “Díaz Barriga was a passionate critic of the Tyler Rationale and of educational technology,” Garduño (2011, 150) reminds, “especially of U.S. industrial or efficiency pedagogy.” Garduño quotes him: “Enough North-American pedagogy! Let our intellectuals commit themselves to studying our educational problems using categories that can allow them to explain their real meaning: they don’t need to go on reading the latest from the Educational Technology Service in order to translate and summarize them in Spanish. This is not research because it does not produce knowledge, yet, on the other hand, it constitutes a dangerous cultural penetration.”

³⁶ See, for example, Herf 1984.

³⁷ The Plan does endorse “projects and other activities that integrate knowledge from multiple sources (curricular content),” informing us that “project-based learning allows the integration of new experiences to previous learning, and also favors the incorporation of previous experiences to new situations.” The “integration of new experiences” is not necessarily behavioral; it is, I suggest, equally intellectual and emotional, although projects can and do inform those modalities of integration, as the U.S. curriculum theorist William Heard Kilpatrick argued a century ago (Pinar 2023, 54-72). This gesture toward educators’ intellectual independence disappears when we read that “the development of projects in an integrated curriculum ... encourages teachers to participate in common objectives that they seek to achieve with their students in a cooperative, critical and creative manner.” Professional autonomy allows for the formulation of “common objectives” (setting aside scholars’ convincing critiques of the concept of “objectives”), but it also affirms the individual educator’s intellectual independence, to go her or his own way.

³⁸ Pinar 2011, 77.

³⁹ Aikin, 1942, 19.

⁴⁰ Jorgensen 2014.

⁴¹ Pinar 2011, 77.

⁴² 1942, 7.

⁴³ Pinar 2011, 78.

⁴⁴ 1942, 7.

⁴⁵ Glazman-Nowalski (2011, 165) specifies this point: “Approaching a research topic implies assuming ideological elements that represent the location and identity of the researcher, defined from her social, psychological, and historical situation.... Often the work is being constructed through following a personal story; it is the result of questions that have arisen during previous reflections that have awakened the need to stop at points of special concern. This work is also one’s answer to others’ perceptions that have seemed erroneous or false to us, and that may have a multiplicity of origins. All this is a crucial part of the intellectual history of the field and of the individual scholar.”

⁴⁶ 2011, 87.