



Implementing a play-based curriculum: Fostering teacher agency in primary school



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ABSTRACT

Due to the increasingly popular conception of schools as an economic production factor, the curriculum has increasingly become a mandatory fixed structure with predefined targets. This often causes conflicts of motives in teachers who also want to do justice to their pupils' interests and sense making. Drawing from Dutch experiences with the Developmental Education curriculum, this article argues that this problem can be solved by implementing a play-based curriculum as a formative intervention, which creates openness for teachers and pupils, and provides opportunities to appropriate mandatory cultural meanings in ways that make sense to the learners. The problems for teachers that emerge in such curriculum can be interpreted in terms of permanent 'double stimulation.' It is argued that teachers' agency in a play-based curriculum can be fostered by offering them appropriate auxiliary means (both material and conceptual) that they can employ willfully and according to their personal system of pedagogical beliefs. This helps them to find solutions for their teaching problems within the cultural-political constraints of the play-based curriculum. Some of the auxiliary means for teaching in a play-based curriculum will be discussed.

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1. Threats to agency: school as an economic production factor

In modern industrialized societies, schools are constantly confronted with problems that originate from contrary tendencies in their surrounding culture, i.e., on the one hand the cultural-economic exigencies (often conditionally linked with the schools' funding), and on the other hand, value-based endeavors to promote personal well-being and personal agency in pupils and teachers.

In industrialized countries schools are increasingly seen as economic production factors that are presumed to raise the general level of welfare in the community for the benefit of everybody. There is, however, a growing discontent among teachers, who feel they have lost ownership of their professionalism and feel degraded to mere executors of imposed curricula (Wilkins, 2011). Schools that conceive of themselves as economic production factors, tend to forget their *pedagogical mission*, i.e., their responsibility to support younger generations for optimal flourishing in society, and to assist them in the formation of a broad cultural *agency*. Such agency builds on each individual's *willingness* to act self-dependently under the circumstances given. Agency is inherently related to participation in and responsibility for the course and moral implications of cultural practices. It implies an integrated configuration of a person's narrative of her/himself ("identity") and the emotional and affective relationship this person establishes with the concrete situation of action. In short, agency refers to the actual ways situated persons willfully master their own life.

In this article I will argue that the conception of schools as economic factors, implemented as mandatory curricula on a daily basis, cannot optimally contribute to the fostering of cultural agency, neither in pupils nor in teachers. Education that fosters agency requires a curriculum that creates openness and allows for taking personal responsibility. Such education allows teachers to act on their

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personal belief systems, while still aiming to provide pupils with cultural contents that enable them to participate autonomously in cultural practices.

The argument starts with a brief reflection on the notion of mandatory curricula and their shortcomings in contributing to the formation of cultural agency. In relation to this, it will be sketched how innovators in the Netherlands tried to find a way out of these problems with the help of a Vygotskian approach. After this explanation a curriculum concept (a play-based curriculum) will be described, which is discursively built with teachers and serves as an auxiliary means to solve daily classroom problems and to reinforce teachers' agency. The approach claims that this way of working in classrooms on the basis of playfully formatted activities, will create openness that can foster both the teachers' and the pupils' agency. Then a brief description will follow of some auxiliary means that were developed in this implementation process. The concluding section, points out that the interpretation of the whole project in terms of double stimulation particularly articulates the importance of the teachers' belief systems for the transformation of provided stimuli into meaningful auxiliary means.

2. What's wrong with the mandatory curriculum?

A curriculum usually describes mandatory contents, competences, values and goals, which are deemed important and necessary for the maintenance of a society at large or an institute in particular. Curricula are materialized in validated curriculum documents. Given their alleged value for the benefit of all, policy makers feel entitled to impose the documents onto schools. Teachers have to implement such curriculum documents as precisely as possible in their classrooms and have to test the pupils on their achievements as prescribed in these documents.

There is, however, a growing body of research on teacher professionalism dealing with personal characteristics of teachers and how these interact with more or less fixed curricula in classrooms (among many others, Bronkhorst, Koster, Meijer, Woldman, & Vermunt, 2014; Wilkins, 2011). When we take the teachers and their pupils as human subjects who try to make sense of their current situations, dealing with the demands of the system, the characteristics of the environment, their own (professional and/or personal) identities and personal ideals, we can identify the following problems in mandatory curricula:

- The *professionalization of teachers* is reduced to mere adoption of curricular documents and prescriptions as neutral instruments for aptly teaching in the classroom, and for solving the problems teachers have to cope with in everyday partly unpredictable practices. Basically, this approach assumes that the teacher can become a mechanic link between the curriculum documents and the pupils' achievements; this neglects the basic human tendency to make sense of a problem situation by relating this situation to personal motives, interests and values. According to Leont'ev (1964, p. 327)¹, the separation between objectified meanings and personal sense is a major condition for the occurrence of alienation. From this point of view, we must take into account that the formation of teachers' professionalism solely on the basis of imposed methods and targets, may create conditions of alienation, and reduce agency.
- The teachers' *will* to serve as good pedagogues for the benefit of children is neglected, as is their will to teach young human beings in order to help them become intellectually and morally self-dependent cultural agents. A mandatory curriculum to a great extent denies the teachers' motive to make responsible choices that reconcile cultural demands and pupils' characteristic voices and personal interests.
- In a fixed curriculum (both in terms of content and structure) *pupils have no opportunity to co-organize their learning trajectory* ("curriculum") on the basis of their actual conceptions of cultural meanings, personal sense and ideas of a desirable life. Like teachers, pupils have little choice in the fixed curriculum. Moreover, pupils' opportunities to negotiate on meanings among peers and teachers are limited, as is the chance to improve their abilities by argumentatively negotiating about meanings. This increases the chances that pupils will build up a limited and mechanic conception of learning, build up a crippled image of what it means to be a (life-long) learner, and build up no experiences with refutations or resistance.

All in all, mandatory curricula with prescribed sequential sets of contents and goals considerably limit teachers and pupils' agency. Mandatory curricula by definition do not offer appropriate contexts for meaningful learning which require personal engagement and create openness for the actors, room for negotiation of meaning and resistance, and at least some degrees of freedom in making choices (e.g., B. van Oers, 2012).

Hence, what is wrong in the mandatory curriculum is *not* its proposal of culturally dignified commodities (like perspectives, concepts, skills, values, aims or even specific goals), but its unwarranted assumption that these curriculum contents and structures are neutral instruments which can be implemented in mechanical ways, even when major pedagogical goals are officially subscribed, like fostering agency, critical reflection, innovative creativity and social responsibility. Mandatory curricula bring some teachers into a situation of conflicting motives as a result of, on the one hand, their motive to adhere to the demands of society and transmit cultural meanings and, on the other hand, their motive to be responsible pedagogues (Wardekker, 2012) and do justice to the interests of the pupils and their personal sense.

¹ I will follow the United Nations system UN87 as a method of transliteration which does more justice to the actual spelling of the Russian names than the current American transliteration habits. I will, for instance, use Vygotskij as transliteration of the name of this well-known Russian psychologist, as it is more consistent than the usual Anglo-Saxon habit of spelling the name as Vygotsky. The last -y in this name actually refers to two different characters (и and й) in the Russian spelling, which is different from the first -y – which in fact replaces yet another character (ы). Although I will strive for consistency in the transliteration of Russian names into the Roman alphabet, some inconsistency will be unavoidable due to the worldwide mixture of different transliteration systems in use, and the necessary acknowledgement of current habits in the spelling of frequently used names. As a result, some names may appear in different form than the ones the reader may be familiar with (like for example Vygotskij vs Vygotsky, Leont'ev vs Leontiev, Lurija vs Luria). In cases of renowned publications (like for example Vygotsky, 1980). I did not, however, change the spelling of the names. Care is taken that no ambiguity will be caused.

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