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Between the place and the world: powerful knowledge and multiscalarity in Geography Teaching

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Abstract

Reflecting the role of geographical knowledge in school implicates reflecting the role of local knowledge in applied curricula. In this paper, we will problematize the issue of powerful knowledge (Michael Young) as a strategy for acknowledging school culture and its impacts on the construction of the autonomy and emancipation of students. Powerful knowledge is acknowledged as a strategy antagonistic to the knowledge of the powerful; it may be applied as a way to understand knowledge in its multiple scales in official curricula. This discussion will be dialogued with a Brazilian bibliography to contextualize the development of the presented debate. Given this, it is reinforced that Geography learning will always be related to a process of becoming aware of the spatial practices involved in the relationship of individuals with their places of experience.

Keywords

Powerful Geography, Geography Teaching, Brazilian bibliography, School Culture, Learning process

Introduction

One of the main pillars supporting the presence of Geography in school and the curricula is its specificity in promoting the development of geographical ways of thinking. Among others, geographical thinking seeks to integrate concepts, forms of spatial representation, and different reasoning processes (Council 2006; ; Castellar and Paula 2020) (Cavalcanti 2019; Duarte 2016; Gomes Da 2017) to contribute to the education of critical individuals aware of their role in the world. Hence, one cannot deny the centrality that knowledge about the locality and community demands have on the mobilization of such knowledge

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and the construction of meaningful and conceptually consistent curricula for the students. One may even say that

Such local definitions and distinctions may influence what it means to 'think geographically' and are therefore key to gaining a deeper understanding of the relationship between the academic discipline and the school subject. (Brooks 2017, 178).

Moreover, the positions shared here also include the assumption that

> [...] the knowledge of the sociospatial characteristics of the place where the school is inserted and the sensitivity of the place of their pedagogical practice particularly touch geography teachers because it is of their métier to understand and reveal the interrelationship that exists between the social living and the organization of the space
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> *(Lopes and Pontuscka 2005, 86).*

In other words, as the authors pointed out, the source of the problematizations of the work of Geography teachers will always be this relationship between the experiences of the individuals and the different forms of space organization. To geographers and Geography teachers, such relationships are always objectified in specific geographical situations, viewed as a "result of the impact of a bundle of events on a place" (Silveira 1999, 25). Hence, the issue of locality in Geography always includes the multiscalar component, in which technical artifacts and actions of diverse orders and origins project over the reality and interact with each other, producing specific dynamics and spatial organizations.

Hence, there is agreement here with the idea that, when speaking of multiscalarity in geographical situations and events, it is necessary to consider that, firstly, "there is no more or less valid scale, the reality is contained in all of them [...]", and, also, that "[...] the scale does not fragment the real, it only allows its apprehension" (Castro 2003, 132). Therefore, within the scope of Geography Teaching, the transit between scales of analysis and, consequently, the necessary movement of the teacher in search for valid significations about that which is taught and learned in school become essential elements to the education of critical and competent individuals relative to their understanding about the world and its contradictions.

This paper intends to reflect on the relationship between this transit of scales in Geography teaching and its potential to produce powerful curricula and pedagogies in Geography Teaching. We intend to address the issue from the references offered by Michael Young (2007, 2011), especially around the concept of powerful knowledge as an idea of opposition to the concept of the school curriculum as the knowledge of the powerful. The knowledge of the powerful is an expression used by the author to designate certain curricular settings that impose intentionalities of symbolic domination over subordinate social groups through education uninterested in social transformation and the full intellectual development of the individuals. Under this condition, knowledge is something that is imposed in the form of utilitarian skills with the purpose of promoting the control of stances and representations about the world, others, and oneself.

In turn, powerful knowledge, among the various meanings it has, is taken herein as an approach regarding the school knowledge that stems from the potential it has to allow the empowering of the individuals in the face of the reality imposed on them through broad and critical understanding about their community and the world.

To develop the argument suggested herein, a reflection around the idea of the power of knowledge within the scope of School Geography is initially presented, positioning it relative to the broader concepts

about the role of knowledge in the schooling process of students. We will contextualize the proposed debate with a Brazilian bibliography to develop Young's theorization. In addition, we seek to situate this debate within the scope of the discussion about the roles of school in contemporaneity, especially relative to its existence in social contexts marked by inequality and differences.

The power of knowledge

For schools to build an effective awareness about their role in contemporary societies, marked at the same time by profound social inequalities and cultural differences, the differentiation of the knowledge that circulates in school spaces becomes an important element in the process of realizing the curricula within the classroom context. Concerning this matter, we highlight here the production of British sociologist Basil Bernstein (1996, 1999), who proposed a thorough analysis of these different forms of discourses subject to pedagogical transformation, especially about the internal principles of their construction and the social bases that support them.

The author initially starts from the assumption of the existence of two basic forms of discourse that other authors have also already explored at different times, each in their way and based on their respective epistemological traditions. According to Bernstein (1999), for example, Bourdieu called such forms of knowledge "symbolic creation and master practices" (idem, p. 158), whereas Jurgen Habermas related them to two distinct universes, described by him as "the lifeworld of the individual and the source for instrumental rationality" (idem, ibidem), respectively. According to the mentioned author, "in the educational field, one form is often referred to as school knowledge and the other as everyday common-sense knowledge, or as 'official' and 'local' knowledge" (Bernstein 1999, 158).

To better understand the similarities and contradictions between these two forms of knowledge, Bernstein (1999) proposed the concepts of vertical discourse (VD) and horizontal discourse (HD). According to the author, the latter is directly connected to common sense and, thus, is characterized by oral transmission and local registration. This means to say that the meanings of HD are directly dependent on the contexts in which they are realized. In turn, VD regards specialized disciplinary knowledge, structured based on explicit patterns of coherence and hierarchically organized. The meanings of VD do not depend on the context of its evocation, i.e., they concern generalizations made from known and explicit criteria, which confers it a more universalistic nature (Bernstein 1999; Morais Neves 2007).

In summary, to Bernstein, the origins of the inequalities generated by the education system are in the differential access of the vertical discourses, which, unlike the horizontal discourses, are learned from oriented and systematic pedagogy legitimized by relationships of vertical dependence on concepts and ideas of reference. This vertical form of knowledge finds, in schools and formal education, its privileged space of transmission, unlike horizontal discourses, which are learned and reproduced in direct contact with individuals from our immediate circles of experience, i.e., the world of everyday culture.

At this point, the formulations by Bernstein (1996, 1999) seem to dialogue directly with the assumptions developed by Vygotsky (2008), especially regarding their proposal that spontaneous concepts and scientific concepts have different forms of construction because, while the former develop in an upwards movement of accumulation and learning, scientific concepts are learned in a downward manner – from top to bottom –, with it being the role of the teacher to promote the meeting between these two concept dimensions for the learnings to have meaning for the individuals (Cavalcanti 1998).

Stemming from this reference, Rubtsov et al. (1996) Rubtsov et al. (1996) also suggested that theoretical knowledge must be taken as the object itself of the teaching activity. Following the distinction made by Vygotsky (2008) regarding the nature of spontaneous and scientific concepts, Rubtsov sought to point out the differences between what they called empirical knowledge and theoretical knowledge. While the former is based on the comparison between objects and their representations, theoretical knowledge preconizes the relationship between things within a system, which points to knowledge substantiated by the formal generalization of object properties. If theoretical knowledge tends toward verticality (between the general and the particular), empirical knowledge is organized horizontally because it is built – through observation and the immediate – based on the comparison between object appearances (Rubtsov et al. 1996).

In the words of the author,

> Theoretical generalization differs considerably from formal empirical generalization. Let us recall that the latter consists of valuing the common and externally similar properties of a variety of objects at the time a comparison is made, whereas theoretical generalization assumes an analysis of the initial building conditions of an object system through its transformation. It is it that allows an individual to appropriate the knowledge after having solved a series of concrete and practical problems
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> *(Rubtsov 1996, 131)*

It becomes clear, from the presented references, that, from theoretical and universal knowledge, it is possible to offer students subsidies for them to reflect on their own worlds critically and autonomously, i.e., in a way that allows building free awareness about the limits imposed by their own conditions of origin, rendering them bearers of an analytical and proactive stance before the world. This is one of the most important functions of schools, and it will not be exercised with the same responsibility and depth by any other social institution.

However, more than considering that a form of knowledge – especially that connected to the vertical, theoretical, scientific, and other discourses – is more important than another, it is worth stressing that each one has specific rules of realization that confer it legitimacy according to the contexts in which they are evoked. More than suppressing culture and diversity, the equality of access to specialized disciplinary knowledge is a way to broaden the individual repertoire of individuals, offering them resources to think about the world and themselves critically and responsibly.

It is evident that this is not the only possibility of reference to think about schools. The conceptions that coexist in the curricular debate are diverse, carrying with them different models of understanding the world. However, the choices made by societies must be conceived as clear political options that effectively reflect the notions of the future shared by the communities and professionals involved with the schools.

The option made and defended here is that of schools grounded in knowledge, in the acknowledgment of diversity and social inequalities, and, above all else, engaged in the utopia of the transformation of the world.

Geography teaching and powerful knowledge

The scenario of uncertainties that marks contemporary life and politics in Brazil and abroad points to a need to offer youths sufficient references for them to take a stance in the face of the broad context of public discussions, marked by profound power inequalities that derive from the use of the force of money in the production of the representations that populate the collective imagination of societies.

The resistance scenarios that present themselves mostly depend directly on the capacity of groups and marginalized societies affected by these problems to delimit their stances with propriety and legitimacy in the public debate. The appropriation of communication codes in universal interaction contexts thus becomes an essential condition for resistance, with schools being potential and privileged environments for their acquisition. The idea of powerful knowledge (Young 2007, 2011) is anchored on this premise, i.e., the need to acquire communication and comprehension codes that lead individuals to their repositioning in the world.

Allied to this matter of powerful knowledge, the geographical reasoning processes allow visualizing the role of Geography in schools from an expectation of generating a specific way of thinking, mediated by the concepts and models offered by the geographical disciplinary knowledge. In these terms:

> Thinking geographically is a uniquely powerful way of seeing the world. (...) Thinking geographically does, however, provide a language – a set of concepts and ideas – that can help us see the connections between places and scales that others frequently miss. That is why we should focus on geography's grammar as well as on its endless vocabulary. That is the power of thinking geographically. (Jackson 2006, 203).

From the words of the author, we highlight two essential elements to understand the relationship between the themes mobilized by the subject in school and the rules that underlie and substantiate the construction of the school Geography discourses: the grammar of Geography, on the one hand, and the so-called infinite vocabulary of the subject, on the other. While the different themes and issues mobilized by teachers in school relate to this infinite vocabulary of Geography in its relationship with the lifeworld of people, thinking geographically through a grammar offered by the subject, on the other hand, corresponds to the different reasoning processes and concepts necessary to building a powerful geographical knowledge, in different contexts.

Based on these references, upon addressing the Geography taught in schools specifically, Maude (2016) made an important reservation indicating that the power of this and other subjects has much more to do with what is done with them than with the knowledge transported by them itself. As powerful knowledge, Geography must be able to present to youths reliable explanations about the problems experienced by them through reflexive and critical readings of the different phenomena that affect their everyday lives. The author stated that powerful geographical knowledge must allow students to understand their problems from models that, in principle, are not part of their everyday repertoires, i.e., the school knowledge needs to add additional viewpoints to the individuals, giving them conditions to question the legitimacy and naturality of the discourses, as well as their origins and intentionalities.

From this conception, the author proposed that powerful geographical knowledge in school consists of five essential dimensions, synthesized in the typology presented next:

Each dimension or type of powerful geographical knowledge has its own characteristics and educational intentionality and may provide a more or less secure basis through which Geography teachers may conduct their planning. One may also notice that such types suggested by the author carry this dimension of the multiscalar relationship, suggesting the importance of the transit between the local and

Table 1. Typology of powerful geographical knowledge

Types	Essential characteristic
1. Knowledge that provides students with "new ways of thinking about the world"	Expansion of the experience horizons of the students;
2. Knowledge that provides students with powerful waysto analyze, explain, and understand the world	Promotion of conceptual thinking and intellectual development;
3. Knowledge that gives students some power over their own knowledge	Self-awareness;
4. Knowledge that enables young people to follow and participate in debates on significant local, national, and global issues	Citizen education;
5. Knowledge of the world	Acknowledgment of the diversities about the world

Maude (2016)

the global as a condition for understanding the world and the autonomous activity of individuals in the face of its contradictions.

In contributing to this debate, Margaret Roberts (2014) drew attention to the fact that the geographical knowledge taught in schools needs to be relevant to the students, i.e., she emphasized that the significance of such knowledge resides in its ability to connect to the different realities of the individuals who attend the schools. In her words:

Geography could be relevant to the location and country in which students live, to their experiences of these locations and awareness of issues affecting their lives. It could mean relevance to understanding current world issues, such as global warming, sustainability, globalization, and sources of energy (...). Relevance could mean that the curriculum relates to student interests. (Roberts 2014, 203).

As the author suggested, the geographical knowledge contained in school curricula needs to handle common issues that affect the local and global realities of which we are part. Therefore, however diverse and specific they may be, when addressed under the viewpoint of geographical concepts, the issues that interest youths acquire new and broad meanings. Such universalist viewpoints tend to allow surpassing understandings substantiated by the superficial appearance of the phenomena, offering subsidies to apprehend the production conditions of the discourses about things, people, and places.

Final notes: about multiscalar practices of resistance

The argument developed herein sought to show that the problem involving the nature of knowledge and the forms of the curriculum in schools is also a problem about the pedagogies that mobilize them. This means that the guarantees of equal access to school knowledge depend directly on acknowledging and understanding the diversity that enlivens the school space. Therefore, in the train of what Young (2007, 2011) proposed, curriculum and pedagogy are two dimensions of the educational practice that need to be understood from their specificities and interactions.

The construction of classroom methodologies and practices and teacher stances of welcoming in the face of difference becomes a condition for the construction of fair schools occupied with promoting the rights to equality and diversity. In these terms, we agree with the conception of "a school that makes work, at the same time, [...] the principles of the right to difference and the right to similarity", with it being so that "difference is only a right if it is affirmed based on the similitude, the universality of the human being". (Charlotte, 2005, 136). In other words, this comprehensive set of rights has to do with the need to belong to the world, on a broad scale, and, at the same time, be acknowledged as an individual or group that has specificities that must be understood and respected locally.

This implicates considering the activity of schools in two dimensions. On the one hand:

> A school that aims at cultural and scientific education, i.e., the mastery of systematized knowledge through which the development of intellectual capabilities is promoted as a condition to ensure the right to similarity, to equality. On the other hand, it is necessary to consider that this primordial function of schools [...] is intended for different individuals, given that the difference is not an exceptionality of the human person but a concrete condition of the human being and educational situations
>
> *(Libâneo 2012, 26)*

The fulfillment of the social functions attributed to schools – socialization, education, and distribution of social roles, as described by Crahay (2013) – seems to depend directly on the acceptance of the idea that schools are complex spaces of rights. To be mindful of this, it is up to education systems to offer teachers sufficient structural conditions to develop their full autonomy in the field of pedagogies. This means to say that the inclusive treatment of the differences within the school space depends directly on workloads that allow more significant involvement with the classes, resources and didactic tools accessible to the teachers, and career and continued education plans that are effective and interesting to the demands of the teachers, among other conditions of valorization of school professionals.

Therefore, the development of the work autonomy of the teachers has to do with their ability to render the curricula relevant to the different students and their realities, promoting the necessary connections between the universe of the school concepts and knowledge and the world of everyday experiences. It is on these powerful pedagogies resulting from the teacher creation work and capable of mobilizing individuals and involving them throughout the learning process that one must place the hope surrounding the fulfillment of the role of schools in the different societies.

However, in allowing the acknowledgment of the differences, the bases proposed herein also point to the necessary referenced construction of the curricula, which perform the function of offering knowledge that allows breaking with the frontiers established by the life context of the students itself, expanding their possibilities of understanding the world and acting critically in the face of their problems.

In geographical terms, this comprehensive set of rights has to do with the need to belong to the totality-world (Straforini 2004), on a broad scale, and, at the same time, be acknowledged as an individual or group that has specificities that must be understood and respected locally. In turn, this seems to translate into an educational meta-right of access to the local and the global or, yet, a right to the multiscalarity in our presence in the world. This idea is associated with the conception of freedom suggested by geographer Éric Dardel (2011), to whom "our freedom is affirmed upon suppressing or reducing the distances" (Dardel 2011,10). As a freedom practice – especially in school –, Geography may present itself as a powerful instrument of acknowledgment of the distances and the possibility of the imagination of the

transit between scales, contributing to a more appropriate understanding of the diversity of the world and our positions about it.

That said, we agree here with Straforini (2018) about the need to not lose sight that the learning of Geography will always be related to a process of becoming aware of the spatial practices involved in the relationship of individuals with their places of experience. Such spatial practices may be defined as (...) *social practices in which spatiality (the spatial organization, territoriality, or the "placeness") is a sharp and prominent component of a form of organization, of the mean of expression, and/or the objects to be reached.* (Souza 2013, 236).

Upon promoting learnings that favor the elaboration of contextualized spatial practices attentive to the everyday experiences and the set of beams of events that project themselves on them, from the principle of multiscalarity, one may point to the education of individuals committed to spatial practices of insurgence, i.e., counterhegemonic (Souza De 2013; Straforini 2018). Such practices tend to allow a more autonomous positioning of students relative to the world, rendering them more self-aware of their locations and the conditions that affect them.

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