# ΣΟΦΙΑ–SOPHIA

## High school: curriculum, knowledge and practices in context*

Horacio Ademar Ferreyra**

** PhD in Education. Professor and researcher at the Universidad Católica de Córdoba (UCC) and Universidad Nacional de Villa María (UNVM); Director of the Adolescent and Youth Education Research Team UCC (unit associated to the Conicet, National Council for Scientific and Technical Research of Argentina). Electronic address: hferreyra@coopmorteros.com.ar

## Abstract

Within the framework of axes and dimensions that have allowed to delineate a possible school, this article delves into the curriculum, articulating it with the teaching practices and with the knowledge ruled in the official design. It also characterizes the dialectic between what is prescribed and what is enabled in terms of content to be taught and learned, and the tensions between selection, organization and sequencing of content and learning. Finally, some proposals are formulated for the conformation of a possible curriculum.

Key words: Curriculum, education, high school, curricular management.

## Introduction

### General considerations

Curriculum involves the analysis and integration of cultural, political, economic, social and technical components in an educational proposal that reflects, among other issues, the type of society that it is intended to be built (Gimeno Sacristán, 2010). Recognizing the multidimensional character that is characteristic of the curriculum, Braslavsky (2002) conceptualizes it as: "A dense and flexible contract between politics, society and teachers" (p.10), which on the one hand prescribes, and on the other, simultaneously, enables changes; thus, it makes compatible and combines density and flexibility:

- General prescriptions that tend to support the implementation processes (density).

- Clear and concrete opportunities for choosing and implementing options in the context of educational institutions (flexibility).

Curriculum is, at the same time, a political-pedagogical project; therefore, a historical, social, cultural and educational one, which underlies ideological, sociological, psychological, epistemological and pedagogical positions [1]. It is, also, the real practices that are developed from this project (Ferreyra, 2015). In this sense, the curricular design is a component of this curriculum and constitutes a framework for professional managers, teachers, technicians and supervisors. Thus, only to the extent that it is understood as a work tool, it has the capacity to generate, in each educational context, a project of action that makes it possible to articulate the prescriptions and practices in terms of building and enriching the experiences and the educational trajectories of students. That is to say, it is not only a curricu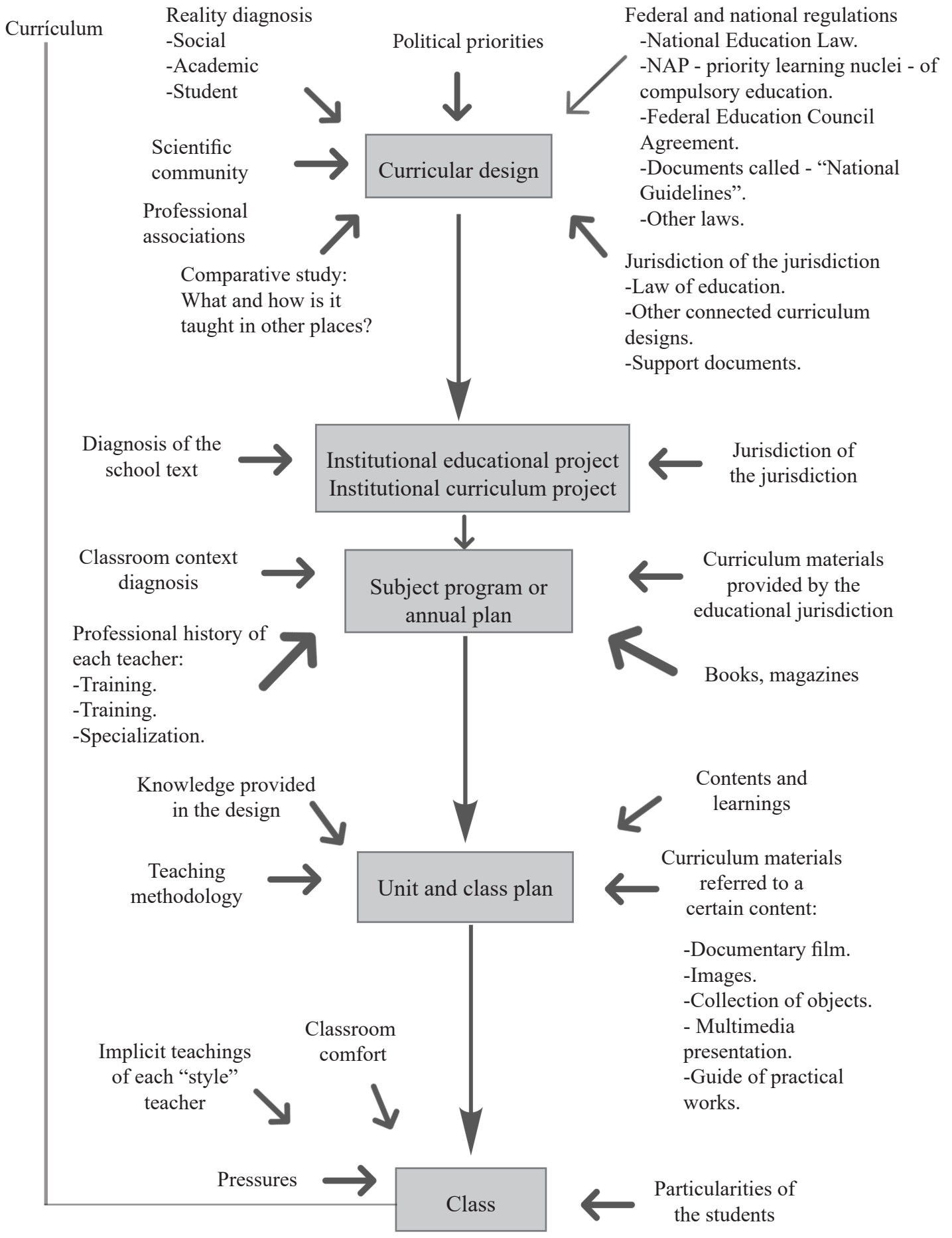lum that is established through documents [2], designs, proposals, but also its development, the knowledge that is effectively taught and learned in the classroom and in the institution as a whole [3].

In line with the above, it is worth mentioning that analyzing the curriculum also involves considering the practices through which the teaching and learning processes are implemented, and the impact they generate on the participating subjects (students, teachers, managers, among others), in their context.

Following Alterman (2009), we conceive curriculum as a project of cultural selection of socially legitimized knowledge, a device for training students and a device for regulating practices in context.

In this broad idea of curriculum, we highlight two central components:

- *Knowledge:* propositional statements (Cols, 2011) that express representations about different fields of reality, and which "are subject to recognition and social control, and are considered susceptible to be involved in activities of thought, communication or transformation of the environment" (p.75).

- *Context:* It covers the spaces and bonds of coexistence, which are established in them as a framework that affects and conditions the relationships, roles and all the processes that are deployed in the school.

Curriculum

**Curricular design**

Reality diagnosis
-Social
-Academic
-Student

Political priorities

Scientific community

Professional associations

Comparative study: What and how is it taught in other places?

Federal and national regulations
-National Education Law.
-NAP - priority learning nuclei - of compulsory education.
-Federal Education Council Agreement.
-Documents called - "National Guidelines".
-Other laws.

Jurisdiction of the jurisdiction
-Law of education.
-Other connected curriculum designs.
-Support documents.

**Institutional educational project
Institutional curriculum project**

Diagnosis of the school text

Jurisdiction of the jurisdiction

**Subject program or annual plan**

Classroom context diagnosis

Professional history of each teacher:
-Training.
-Training.
-Specialization.

Curriculum materials provided by the educational jurisdiction

Books, magazines

**Unit and class plan**

Knowledge provided in the design

Teaching methodology

Contents and learnings

Curriculum materials referred to a certain content:

-Documentary film.
-Images.
-Collection of objects.
- Multimedia presentation.
-Guide of practical works.

**Class**

Implicit teachings of each "style" teacher

Classroom comfort

Pressures

Particularities of the students

## Curriculum and high-school education: tensions

Regarding high-school education, we can highlight, in the first place, those lines of research and reflection that relate the curricular and pedagogical organization of the high school with the impact that it generates in the inclusion and permanence of the students in the level. We rescue them as valuable, because as Zapiola (2011) argues, the double tension between compulsive normative [4] and inclusion is the great challenge for high-school education in Argentina, in which collide the old tradition of elitist school and the obligatory nature of this educational level for all young people. Social inequality and inequity of the system seem to be found with school designs, not always adequate to the diversity that populates high schools in Argentina which, by the way, was always present, with different nuances, in the schools and in the classrooms, but that fact remained invisible until a few decades ago, in a school crossed by homogeneity.

The arrival to high-school education of young people from different social sectors and different cultures, as Jacinto and Terigi (2007) say:

> It destabilized previous agreements and interests. The educational level is welcoming new contingents of students who no longer adopt school attitudes and the expected motivations. The school has to manage heterogeneous groups and it is not enough the performance of its traditional role (...). In this context, specialized works have coincided for years in the need to reformulate the curricular selection (pp. 38-39).

Jacinto and Terigi (2007) also agree in characterizing the curriculum of the high school as a significant classifier, based on three characteristics that are inherent to it:

- Construction of disciplinary knowledge with marked delimitations between fields.

- Teachers selected on the basis of qualifying criteria.

- Promotion of a set of core subjects foreseen in most curricula.

These characteristics remained stable throughout the 20th century, and some compilation attempts by areas [5] have not altered the classification pattern.

In the same direction, Terigi (2008) points out that in high school, an iron tripod has been formed, where it is formed the plot that links a classified and delimited curriculum, in correlation with the designation of teachers by specialty, within the framework of a teaching job for hours of classes in a mosaic curriculum. Also, Feldman (2009) uses a metaphor to account for a distinctive triad of the pedagogical device of the high school: the "trinity" conformed by the curriculum, the school schedule and the division or section: "Tripartite classification of knowledge, the time and the grouping of students (...) basic scenario of school life" (page 63). To this, it is added the assumption of presence (Terigi, 2010), so: "We have difficulties to give the appropriate pedagogical response to these forms of presence in school that do not comply with that expectation we have, which is that of every day, all the time". (p.11)

Fractures in the students' school trajectory are also associated with knowledge of scarce social relevance, which is little significant for them, and which still denote a weak presence of emerging and/or transversal themes (sexuality, addictions, coexistence, environment, road culture, cooperative education and mutualism, among others), of interest for adolescents and young people, as well as the gradual incorporation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in teaching and learning processes (Unicef, 2015).

This may imply the risk that the curriculum appears alien and distant to the students, meaningless for their lives and with little chance of generating motivation, with the aggravating circumstance that a curriculum of these characteristics can become even stranger for the students of vulnerable sectors, which do not count in their contexts with incentives that contribute to making sense of school learning.

In this line, Montes (2008) argues that the possibility of advancing towards the effective fulfillment of the universalization of the secondary level as a basic condition of social inclusion and the concretion of the life projects of the young, obliges us to question ourselves: " About the feasibility that high-school education has to be extended while preserving its original matrix, configured disciplinary in Modernity with ideal trajectories planned by level and year, under uniform and standardized formats" (p.52).

In a similar direction, Romero (2009) says that the possibility of effectively achieving the universalization of high-school education is played in breaking with "The academic format that prevailed for decades, and replacing it with

flexible and creative ways capable of reconfiguring scientific knowledge into knowledge to learn from social, political and intellectual complexity" (page 9); knowledge that is produced, that interrogates and that enables, we would add by agreeing with Montes (2008). A change of direction in the ways of organizing school life allows learning to be strengthened through a strengthening of the student's link with the teacher and with what is known, in its context, in order to transform the latter into knowledge.

Dussel 2010 pointed out that the attempts to develop strategies of adaptation of the institutional and pedagogical organization of the high school in order to incorporate new contents, of social relevance and closer to the problems of the young people, or new participants who accompany the trajectories of the students ( tutors, pedagogical coordinators, ICT facilitators, among others) are usually circumscribed to pilot projects or programs predominantly limited to populations in situations of socio-educational vulnerability. Today, we can say that these concerns have begun to be addressed with the intention of universalizing the improvement processes; and that, from the implementation of the Improvement Plans of each high school institution; these new participants or functions are present in the majority of high schools in the country.

As a closing summary of this section, we can affirm that the consideration of the curricular component within the framework of a *possible high school* implies meeting the following criteria:

- *Selection* of learnings and contents (legitimate knowledge).

- *Organization* (classification of these learnings and contents).

- *Sequencing* and theories of teaching and learning that give meaning to these options, sometimes in tension.

## Defining some problems

Given some general guidelines that allow us to read globally the field of tensions of high-school education in the dimension of the curriculum, knowledge and practices, we formulate below some problems built in dialogue with research and essay production of the last decade:

a. Although the designs and jurisdictional proposals reveal definitions aimed at overcoming the fragmentation and curricular disarticulation, and prescribe diversity of pedagogical and alternative formats for teaching, there persist in the institutional curricular project, in some cases, formal designs that provide homogeneous organizational modalities , with little margin for curricular variability.

b. Decontextualization of the curriculum in relation to the geographical diversity of our national territory. Addressing specificities such as those that are typical of schooling in rural contexts is insufficient; as Terigi (2012) points out, it is necessary the recognition of the specificity of urban centers.

c. In the programming, selection, organization and sequencing of content carried out by each teacher, as well as in the design of activities foreseen for their development, biases of traditional social and school representations about the evidences of learning tend to appear; for example: it is common for educators to express that there's more learning if "many subjects are seen" and students "write everything in their folders" (orality is often perceived as "wasting time," "not doing anything" or "disorganization of the class"); if it is a group activity; it is maintained that students "learn little" and their evaluation is difficult; it is said that it is necessary to move from "the simplest" to "the most complex", which usually leads to distorted learning sequences that subtract the possibility that young people approach the complexity and multidimensionality of concepts, facts, phenomena, languages , practices.

d. The fragmentation of the contents often results in a denaturalization of the object of teaching and learning. Although the predominantly disciplinary matrix of high-school education has been pointed out as one of its weaknesses, it seems pertinent to recover some objections to the possible simplification that could be aimed at this statement, in order to contribute to a clearer delimitation of the problem. As Fumagalli (2000) contributes, "equating *curricular fragmentation* with *organization of teaching contents in subjects or disciplines* is a simplification that not only does not help to think about the complexity of the problem, but also shifts the focus of the analysis" (p.78) What is involved is to think of fragmentation

as a problem, in terms of building knowledge and to notice how a fragmented organization affects the processes of teaching and learning in the classroom; it also impacts on the students, subtracting opportunities for the construction of wide and deep knowledge schemes.

e. Manifestation of the existing gap between generations in the access and use of new technologies in educational institutions, and difficulties in operating the transformations that ICT impose on the organization of time and space, on the dynamics and modes of management of the classes, the ways of appropriating knowledge and dialoguing with them, the relationships of authority and epistemic hierarchy in the classroom (in relation to ICT, many times students are the ones who hold the knowledge, those who know more than the teacher). In this sense, there remains to continue strengthening the development of new pedagogical practices with ICT, so that the school be effectively positioned as an area of personally significant and socially relevant learning (Dussel and Quevedo, 2010, Lugo and Kelly, 2011).

f. Didactic strategies in which there predominates the logic of linearity; and sequential order is confronted with ways of learning from the iconographic and hyper-textual logic, a confrontation that marks a cultural distance between teachers and students. Added to this are forms of evaluation often centered more on control and measurement than on understanding.

g. Difficulties to achieve intra (between cycles) and inter-institutional articulation both with the preceding (primary) level and with the next (higher) level, which problematizes not only the processes involved in the transition moments, but also those of continuity of studies in the subsequent level. Among the various incident participant factors, there stands out the fact that each section of schooling has historically developed by giving rise to its own traditions and differentiated academic subcultures. The poor articulation is also manifested in the school-work relationship.

h. The Argentina high-school accreditation system presents -although progress is observed- quite rigidity associated with forms established in modernity; which weaken in many opportunities the possibilities of structural changes in the organization of times and spaces of the institution; and which could accompany the trajectories of the students from their own particularities.

## Possible proposals

The mere enunciation of high school problems would lead us to be trapped in the impossibility of thinking about deep changes; and above all, that they can be carried out in the medium and long term. To reverse this risk, we present some proposals that arise from what has been investigated so far:

a. To deepen the changes for high-school education from a broad and inclusive political reference, which includes political, cultural, economic and social aspects, with guidelines and principles that build an educational plot. These changes proposed by the macro policy from which each province consolidates its project, will be concretized in the institutional micro-policies outlined by each school, in their transformation itineraries.

b. To strengthen curricular proposals in teacher training institutions of different disciplinary fields of high school. The objective is to produce a long-term structural transformation, so as not to fall into a decontextualized formation.

c. To deepen the formation of the institutional driving teams, so that they continue to mobilize the transformations of the educational level (macro) and intra-institutional (micro) that educational policies propose for high school. It is no longer a model based on the unipersonal prototype, but rather of collegiate teams that assume actions in shared and collaborative processes, generating a synergy capable of leading transformative processes.

d. To give continuity to the processes of review and construction of a flexible curriculum, articulated (horizontally and vertically), regionalized and contextualized (legitimizing it in the characteristics of social life outside the school), from a participatory perspective of all the participants in the education system. In the tension between the common and the diverse, then, we must bear in mind Terigi's warning (2009):

> That this shared formation does not destroy the singularities and the local culture, nor codify as the only authorized culture of specific sectors of the population; on the contrary, that it promotes an understanding of the culture and interests of others (pp. 10-11).

This demands to accommodate new organizational modalities that expand and enrich the learning opportunities offered to young people; initiate and

sustain gradual actions, proposes Feldman (2009): "That (they) weaken the force projected by the triad [curriculum, school schedule and division or section] and open spaces, in order to improve the school experience" (p.71). For this, it is necessary to develop and/or strengthen pedagogical proposals that contemplate other times (extensive and intensive), spaces (school and extracurricular, face-to-face or not), strategies and activities (instances of shared work between curricular spaces, alternations, elective subjects, internships and other educational practices in the context, fairs and exhibitions open to the community, among other possibilities).

e. To strengthen the processes of selection, organization and sequencing of significant and relevant learning, promoting the integration of knowledge around structuring axes, generating themes, areas of student experience (sexuality, ICT, healthy life [6], etc.) among other possibilities, with respect to which Dussel (2008) states:

> Today it also corresponds to consider what other possible worlds can be offered from the school, in dialogue and in relation to the world in which we live (...) in a time when everything is fluid and instantaneous, it is worth insisting with the value of reflection and induction in systematic knowledge of the disciplines, but without becoming old things, meaningful only within the school; rather as knowledge subject to the sieve of its social value, for their ability to respond old and new questions of human societies (p.15).

In this line, it is necessary not only to incorporate and strengthen emerging or transversal themes (addictions, coexistence, road culture, environment, cooperative education and mutualism, etc.) in curricular proposals, but also to explore new ways of inclusion and approach in the teaching practices that contemplate them. In addition, it is about broadening the idea of basic literacies to include the knowledge, interactions and technologies that are now dominant in our society, and to train new generations so that they can link with them in more creative, freer and more plural ways.

The key is to identify what is really to be taught and learned in high school, in each of its cycles and years, because students are not going to learn it in life or in subsequent cycles and years, and with this vacancy, it would seriously affect not only their school trajectory but also their social inclusion. This has led us to think gradually about how to transform a content-centered curriculum into one focused on the acquisition and development of skills, which means thinking about the curriculum in terms of learning, specifying the scope of the contents involved in them [7].

f. To promote the planning of various curricular formats: workshops, seminars, projects, academic associations, observatories, laboratories, field work, module, among others, so that their subsequent implementation enables various organizational modalities, different ways of relating to knowledge, and making it "to circulate" in the classrooms, variety of spaces and groupings.

g. To keep accompanying the processes of implementation and curricular development through instances of training located or focused on the school, promoting pedagogical practices that contemplate the theory-practice integration in a more clear and meaningful way, also including guidelines for working proposals for inter and intra-institutional articulation in context; rescuing good practices in curricular development is also another possible alternative. In addition, it is promoted the strategy of linking education with socially productive work, through instances of student participation in their community.

h. To re-define the forms and meanings of evaluation through discussion spaces around the evaluation models used by teachers, in which they can reflect, define and discuss criteria and ways of evaluating learning. According to Dubet (2010), these criteria and forms do not necessarily have to be the same and common in all the curricular spaces or before diverse proposals; on the contrary, he maintains, they must be multiple and diverse and not be reduced to the measurement of knowledge, but (also to) the welfare of the students and their social capacities, which should be equally important criteria of evaluation in a democratic school. It is also necessary to optimize the mechanisms and instruments for sharing the results of the evaluation with students and their families. As a nodal point of any evaluative process, shifting the consideration of the negative aspect from what has not been achieved or not learned - that is, of the deficit- to focusing on the positive aspects: what the student actually learned as a basis on which to anchor the new learning, from the recognition of what has been achieved.

i. To intensify work in interdisciplinary and integrated teams of teachers that promote curriculum topics, in order to improve and re-define

learning (for example, with work projects that link two or more disciplines, subjects or spaces for the development of content, and for evaluation).

j. To plan, create and sustain school networks that allow coordinated and joint work with other local and foreign institutions, thus enhancing the formal and non-formal links -both face-to-face and virtual- which allow communications to approach times and spaces and favor making part of both the community of belonging and the world, a vital spring to reduce the gap that marks social, ethnic, religious and cultural differences.

k. To enhance curricular spaces related with life and work training, making these two dimensions to grow in virtue of the particular characteristics of each orientation of high-school education; allowing in this way that students can gradually get into the reality of the "school outside," and that they acquire essential knowledge for the construction of a life project that responds to their needs and personal interests, as part of the community of belonging.

## Conclusions

The processes of transformation -and in particular, those of curricular order- require to be thought with a long-term projection that allows to discuss and reflect on components related to historical, social, cultural, economic and educational aspects. Proposing a curriculum as a political-pedagogical project requires political decisions, but not only the governmental ones, but from all people involved in educational institutions: teachers, students and families.

The education embodied in a broad curricular proposal involves the social group as a whole, as its effects affect all social subjects that go through schools and social life. To this end, a professional training of those responsible -directives and teachers- is essential for an update and deepening that enables a structural transformation of high-school education in the long term, not only of contents, but also of didactics (resources, methodological and evaluative proposal).

Many of the proposals that have been outlined here begin to be traveled by the different provinces/jurisdictions of the country, which suggests that the desired transformations are possible. It is necessary, then, to consolidate long-term policies that promote these changes.

## Footnotes

[1] In this principle, there are articulated and taken again curriculum concepts developed by different authors in different works, studies and investigations. Among others, see: Schwab, 1974; Gimeno Sacristán, 1981; Stenhouse, 1984; Coll, 1986; Gimeno Sacristán, 1988; Elliot, 1990; Apple, 1996; Kemmis, 1998; Grundy, 1998.

[2] In Argentina, there exist Priority Learning Nuclei (NAP, for its initials in Spanish), agreed for the whole country; the curricular designs of each educational jurisdiction conform to these NAP. On the other hand, at a more contextualized level of curricular concretion, each institution develops the project of the school -in some provinces/educational jurisdictions it is called Institutional Educational Project (PEI, for its initials in Spanish), with its priorities and its distinctions; as a component of this project, the agreements that teachers make about the contents, and how to teach them, are specified in the institutional curricular project (PCI, for its initials in Spanish).

[3] To expand, see: De Alba, 1995; Connell, 1997; Terigi, 1999; Angulo y Blanco, 2000; Demeuse and Strauven, 2006, among others.

[4] For a better understanding of the topic in the Preliminary Document for the discussion on High-school education in Argentina (Federal Council of Education of Argentina, 2008), it is expressed: "... one of the most ambitious goals of the National Education Law is the extension of the obligation for high-school level. For achieving this, it is an imperative for the State, for society as a whole and for citizens in particular. State, society and citizens must be forced to generate the conditions of universality, so that all young people can enter, remain and graduate from high school" (p.3).

[5] In this sense, it is enough to remember some projects and programs, such as the case of *Escuela para Jóvenes* (School for the Youth), a program promoted by the Ministry of Education of the Nation in 2000 (Government of Córdoba, 2010), intended to reform High-school education in Argentina. Among other strategies, and in search of a curricular reorganization in schools, it proposed reducing the number of curricular spaces of simultaneous courses during a school year, and facilitating the hourly concentration of teachers. To

this end, the study plans of the institutions around some curricular areas were readjusted. For more information on the results of the implementation of this program, see also: Iaies, Delich and Gamallo, 2002.

[6] A cross-cutting theme that is currently under special consideration. It is about encouraging, promoting and teaching students contents that relate to habits and customs for achieving a healthy life. For this, a series of proposals can be generated and planned that allow students not only to know and value the importance of good nutrition, personal hygiene, physical and mental health, among other factors, but also to create spaces and school situations that allow these issues to be part of everyday life.

[7] This perspective, distinctive of the enunciation of the NAP, has already been taken again in the curricular designs for High-school education of the province of Córdoba (Government of Córdoba, 2011).

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