Curricular Contextualization: Tracking the Meanings of a Concept

Abstract

The concept of education has been evolving in order to include social concerns in the teaching and learning process (Kärkkäinen, 2012), bringing about more attention to distinct contexts and realities in which schooling occurs. This has led to an expansion of the concept of curricular contextualization in educational, political and curricular discourses (Smith, 2005; Dowden, 2007), nevertheless, this concept needs some clarification. This paper does so through a literature review process, while contributing to knowledge production through the identification of theoretical perspectives concerning curricular contextualization. The literature review process enabled the definition and mapping of this concept, and the identification of five approaches through which curricular contextualization can be developed. These approaches are: curricular contextualization focused on the place, on the student, on the pedagogical practice, on the attention to diversity and on disciplinary contents.

Keywords: curricular contextualization, teaching and learning practices, school education, perspectives on Curricular Contextualization

Introduction

School education is a complex process involving social concerns in teaching and learning. Therefore, more attention has been paid to distinct contexts and realities in which schooling occurs. The concern with social aspects presents challenges and demanded many attempts to develop new pedagogical and didactical strategies and the adapting of old ones that no longer fit with current educational purposes, in order to promote a better school environment which will contribute to developing a coherent curriculum (Beane, 2003). Such aim is also an important orientation from EU policies and reinforces international influences in educational decisions in many European countries (Dale, 2000; Kärkkäinen, 2012; Nieveen & Kuiper, 2012). This trend led to a renewed attention to cultural diversity and social equity insurance by schools, requiring a change in curriculum development processes, as recommended by the OECD (Field, Kuczera, & Pont, 2007). Thus, new perspectives concerning skills, competencies, thematic approaches, major issues in society, personal qualities, goals and principles and mixed approaches (functional and thematic) have been arising in several European countries, aiming to contribute to the improvement of educational systems (Kärkkäinen, 2012). Curriculum is no longer a mere compilation of instrumental aspects developed in order to transmit knowledge but rather a process that also involves the everyday experiences which are lived in schools, all of which may contribute to students' personal and educational development. This understanding of curriculum requires the development and implementation of pedagogical strategies able to ensure equity in educational systems and curricular justice (Connell, 1993). This is in line with Bernstein's (1998) idea of "recontextualization" – a process of adequacy of the nationally prescribed curriculum to a lived and meaningful way of learning. The concept of "recontextualization" has been used in various ways and reshaped, taking into account aspects

influencing the processes of teaching and learning, such as the centrality of the context characteristics, the centrality of the individuals (students, teachers), the nature of the pedagogical practices, among others. This shift is the basis of curricular contextualization, a concept that needs to be clarified. This paper intends to achieve the conceptual clarification of curricular contextualization, through a literature review process.

The Review Process

In order to achieve the stated goals, a number of methodological procedures and options were followed. The period of time considered was the decade between 2001 and 2010. This choice was based on the political changes that occurred in European Countries following the Lisbon strategy decisions and certain international initiatives that shape curricular policies and guide educational practices – OECD "*Education and Training Policy: No more failures – Ten Steps to Equity in Education*" (Field et al., 2007).

Concerning the search for articles, a set of key-words were selected and used. The keyword selection followed a procedure close to the Delphi method (Linstone & Turoff, 1975), which concerns an attempt to establish a consensus of meanings attributed to a concept, in this case the concept of curricular contextualization. To do so, twelve researchers were asked to relate some keywords with curricular contextualization. This exercise resulted in the following keywords: Contextualization; Content; Meaningful; Student-centred; Place-based; Context-based; Subjects; Local; Development; Situated learning/teaching; Integration. This keywords organization allowed the selection of literature that constituted the *corpus* of the analysis.

As for the journals within which the literature research was performed, the aim was to ensure the search for articles published in English and Portuguese. This was achieved by having

recourse to databases acknowledged within the academic community where curricular journals from many countries are indexed: ISI, Scopus, Scielo, Qualis. This resulted in a total of 200 articles. The 200 articles, identified by their key-words, were then re-selected through the analysis of their abstracts, resulting in a total of 56 articles with abstracts related to curricular contextualization. All articles were then analyzed via content analysis (L'Écuyer, 1990; Krippendorf, 2003), assuming that these texts contained a wide range of information demanding a thorough analysis in order to understand and unravel meanings and opinions expressed by the authors. This allowed the identification of fundamental aspects, central trends and key features related to curricular contextualization in either an explicit or implicit way.

Results

The methodological procedure of literature review allowed the identification of five focuses through which curricular contextualization can be developed.

Results are organized over two axes: 1) Tracking meanings on a concept and 2) Main trends in curricular contextualization. The first focuses on 6 articles (from the 56 selected) that were specifically dedicated to contextualization, aiming to understand and discover what meanings can be attributed to the concept. The second focuses on the other 50 articles that present concepts related to curricular contextualization, aiming to establish parallels between them and curricular contextualization and understanding how all the concepts are related. At this point it was possible to systematize the data and define the five different focuses (as referred to previously) regarding curricular contextualization.

1) Tracking Meanings in a Concept

Aiming to clarify and track the meanings attributed to curricular contextualization, the first task was to search for articles dedicated exclusively to this subject, a difficult task which resulted in few articles: only 6 articles with contextualization as their central topic were found. Despite the small amount of publications, it was possible to verify that the curricular contextualization formulations which were found are consistent with one another. Among the 6 articles, 4 discuss contextualization in a deeper way and attempt to define it (Kalchick & Oertle, 2010; King, Bellochi, & Ritchie, 2007; Gillespie, 2002; Yamauchi, 2003).

One of the definitions found in literature is presented by Kalchik and Oertle (2010), referring to Mazzeo (2008), who defines contextualization as a "diverse family of instructional strategies designed to more seamlessly link the learning of foundational skills and academic or occupational content by focusing teaching and learning squarely on concrete applications in a specific context that is of interest to the student…" (Kalchik & Oertle, 2010, p. 1). In the same line of thought, King et al. (2007), for whom curricular contextualization is called "Context-based learning", defines it as "a group of learning experiences that encourages students to transfer their understanding of key concepts to situations that mirror real life" (Queensland Studies Authority, 2004, p. 11, cited in King et al., 2007, p. 366). Concluding, in their comparative study between content-based and context-based approaches in education, that "context-based approaches help students to make connections between chemistry concepts and real-world applications" (King et al., 2007, p. 379). These definitions point towards a sense of contextualization as a pedagogical approach that improves the odds of the curriculum being meaningful to students and useful in everyday life, an educational feature considered as crucial for successful learning. This is in accordance with Gillespie's (2002) statement that "research shows that learning transfers from one context to another more effectively when the learner

understands not only the facts but also the 'big picture'" (Gillespie, 2002, p. 3). This author defends the use of contextualization, by teachers, in order to reach the transferable learning, considering this as a promising approach. Yamauchi (2003) corroborates this when stating that "when teachers contextualize instruction, students become motivated because what they are learning is more meaningful and relevant to their lives outside of school" (Yamauchi, 2003, p. 382).

All these authors seem to rely on a conception of education that is concerned with attributing meaning and relevance to schooling, and not only with transmitting curricular knowledge, emphasizing the need to think about curriculum development and teaching and learning processes in a more comprehensive way. To summarize, it seems clear that curricular contextualization is presented in literature as a key concept able to promote meaningful learning. Hence, there is a need to think the curriculum taking into account the individuals, places and cultures.

2) Main Trends in Curricular Contextualization

From the analysis of the remaining 50 articles, (56 collected minus 6 referred to in the previous section), it was possible to identify five major focuses for teaching and learning closely connected to curricular contextualization that seem to be based on different – but complementary – approaches. Once again, recalling this paper's aim, it was possible to identify some aspects that characterize curricular contextualization: 1) the development of connections between the curriculum and situations familiar to students; the improvement of the curriculum and the social context relationship within which education occurs (place); 2) the promotion of a relationship between the curriculum and the student's interests and characteristics (student); 3) the ways

through which teachers adapt and fit the curriculum; 4) the adaptation of the school curriculum in order to make it more clear and interesting to students (disciplinary contents); 5) the establishment of connections between the curriculum and real life (diversity). These constitute the basis of the five focuses found in the literature review, showing that curricular contextualization is a widely accepted phenomenon in these articles. The five main focuses or ways to perform this adaptation are curricular contextualization based on: the place, the student; the pedagogical practice, the attention to diversity and the disciplinary content.

1st focus: Curricular Contextualization based on place

From the 50 articles that reveal curricular contextualization focuses, 8 are specifically dedicated to the issue of the place and the centrality that it should assume in teachers' pedagogical practices, supporting the idea that the place where education happens is central when organizing the process of teaching and learning. The authors supporting this dimension believe that the place, while having strong cultural features – being part of the life habits, social background, day-to-day local routines – is relevant and interesting to students and constitutes a promising starting point when planning and developing the curriculum. Emphasizing the place, one can build a curriculum which is close to students' lived and experienced reality, in which subject content can easily be related to real life situations, increasing students' understanding of such matters (Author, 2005b; Kemp, 2006; Shriner, Schlee, & Libler, 2010; Kitchens, 2009; Im & Pak, 2012).

Smith (2005, p. 8) presents a perspective on "place-based education" and states that

Teaching in this way does not require the elimination of non-local knowledge so much as the simple inclusion of the local.

It is possible to relate this with curricular contextualization given that it stands for the use of knowledge already close to students in order to reach for the abstract knowledge of school subjects, increasing understanding and learning. This is what Smith (2005) presents as "place-based education", basing the teaching and learning process on the local and extending it to the global.

This perspective is shared by Sahasewiyon (2004, p. 495) who considers that

> The subject matter and learning processes in the curriculum should also be relevant to the daily lives of the people. They should be based on knowledge that comes from the local environment and economic surroundings. They should deal with the people's problems and the needs of the local communities, which arise in a different manner in each environment.

On the same line, Paliwal and Subramaniam (2006, p. 25), referring to the National Curriculum Framework, state that "Perhaps one of the most strongly debated elements […] is the emphasis on contextualising learning and what has been called 'local knowledge'". This means that attention should be paid to local aspects, including the environment, the economic context and communities' needs (Ault, 2008; Felício, 2010).

Basing the learning process on local features and daily events is one of the keys to improving students' learning and school achievement, by establishing connections between day-to-day knowledge and more general and abstract knowledge not so familiar or close to students. This connection seems to be crucial for developing understanding and allows students to deepen their knowledge and to reach a useful level of knowledge which will be valid in the future.

All these articles support the concept that the place is central and can constitute a good asset for developing teaching and learning processes which are able to promote students´ success.

2nd focus: curricular contextualization based on the student

Assuming that an adequate curriculum ought to be close and familiar to students, it seems logical that the students themselves should play a crucial part in the development of curricular contents. The authors of the 13 articles supporting this curricular contextualization focus believe that, in order for the curriculum to be significant and understandable to students, it is necessary to base it on their interests and lives. This is closely linked with the idea of "student voice" (Cook-Sather, 2006; Timperley & Parr, 2009; Flutter, 2007) which sustains the concept of students as active parts of their own educational and formative process. There is also the importance of engaging students (Lawrence, 2007; Hancock & Mansfield, 2002) in the development and definition of subject content and in the framework of pedagogical processes (Author, 2010; Bernhardt, 2009). As Souto-Manning (2008, p. 97) states "…school, being a social space, should open its doors to the discussion of the reality of their students, starting with the experiences students bring with them into the classroom".

The revised literature (Goodson & Crick, 2009; Crick, 2009; Hartnell-Young & Vetere, 2008) shows that, when students are involved in their learning process, they will most likely understand and enjoy school education and reach better outcomes. As affirmed by Gravoso, Pasa, Laba, & Mori (2008, p. 116),

it is generally agreed that if students perceive their learning situation as affording them a deep understanding, they adopt learning strategies that lead them to understand the subject matter better

And by Chung and Chow (2004, p. 166) who found that a pedagogical practice focused on "the learning experiences, learning perceptions and learning capabilities of the students, received encouraging feedback from the students".

The author that perhaps, best justifies this dimension is Doyle (2009, p. 156), who claims that

this approach is grounded in the notion that positive outcomes accrue when we value the personal dignity and integrity of students […] invite them to engage through intrinsic interest, offer trustworthy advice and directives and provide them with the resources and support necessary to achieve ends that are meaningful and fulfilling.

All these articles supporting this curricular contextualization focus set the centrality on the student, on the importance of considering students´ characteristics and interests in order to motivate students. These articles hold that contextualizing the pedagogical practices taking into account the student is a promising pathway for educational processes.

3rd focus: curricular contextualization based on pedagogical practice

Another focus for curricular contextualization development, present in 17 of the revised articles, is pedagogical practice, that is, teachers' approaches within the classroom context and how they contribute to increasing students' outcomes as learning promoters (Kalbach & Forester,

2006; Paliwal & Subramaniam, 2006; Bustos-Orosa, 2008). To achieve curricular contextualization, one must employ diverse pedagogical practices (Grainger, Barnes, & Scoffham, 2004; Beane, 2003) able to promote learning and to establish classroom environments and dynamics, adequate to students' distinct needs, expectations, interests, rhythms and styles (Dowden, 2007; Yamauchi, 2003; Author et al., 2010).

Teachers are responsible for creating a well functioning environment and establishing equilibrium between the national curriculum and a contextualized curriculum. Nevertheless, as Choppin (2009) and Davies (2006) emphasize, this can be a tricky process that presents some difficulties for teachers, especially when it requires new approaches and methods.

Therefore, the way teachers act, the way they plan and execute their class programs, how they manage the classroom and how they set up the teaching and learning environment are key aspects of students' success and are central when defining and conceiving curricular contextualization (Formosinho & Machado, 2008; Doyle, 2009; Buendía, Gitlin, & Doubia, 2003; Kumar & Natarajan, 2007).

King et al. (2007) compared a content-based approach with a contextualized approach and, based on the point of view of a young student who experienced both, the authors found that a contextualized approach is more successful, allowing better learning, improving motivation and promoting student outcomes. For that reason, the authors proclaim the need to use contextualized practices in order to improve learning and teaching, as stated by Kitchens (2009) regarding the "situated pedagogy".

This issue is also addressed by Bergamaschi (2007) in a study concerning the schooling of indigenous village natives which demands the adaptation of formal curricular guidelines to that specific environment, in order achieve a successful schooling process. Also, Wei (2009, p.

271), when referring to specific classroom practices, states that a "…curriculum should: meet the needs of all students; be oriented to students' development".

All these examples confirm that, as expressed in this paper, curricular contextualization depends on, and is developed and achieved by, a number of practices and procedures through which the curriculum is transformed (Gillespie, 2002) and the central role that teachers play in curricular contextualization development.

4th focus: curricular contextualization based on attention to cultural diversity

The revised literature frequently presents traces of curricular contextualization in texts focusing on students' diversity (14 of the 56 articles), especially with regard to their cultural features and the issues arising as a result. Accepting that curricular contextualization is a pedagogical process involving procedures aiming to establish connections between disciplinary contents and real life situations experienced by students, their characteristics as individuals and their culture, it is clear that it should be adequately planned to deal with diversity. Such diversity includes many elements of students' social and cultural background which is particularly important when we consider the schooling of minority communities. In fact, all these situations demand careful planning, especially when considering the aim of an equitable education for all individuals. In such cases, curricular contextualization appears as a potential approach to the curriculum which can diminish inequalities and transform curricula to respond to diversity (Yamauchi, 2003). Kalbach and Forester (2006), Mfum-Mensah (2009), Morais and Neves (2009) and Moreira (2007) focused on identical situations.

With regard to the diversity of cultural and social backgrounds, Stemn's work (2010) is a clear example of the use of curricular contextualization as a means to adapt practices and

curriculum content. Likewise, authors such as Wu (2010), Fleuri (2005), Moreira and Candau (2003), Peck, Sears, and Donaldson (2008) and Sleeter and Stillman (2005) have also worked in this area.

Focusing on the schooling of indigenous populations who do not share any cultural, social or historical features with the "normal" society, the use of contextualization based on the characteristics of the population, local features and their habits and history, makes schooling an easier and more successful process (Goodson and Crick, 2009).

Bergamaschi (2007), Nascimento (2010) and Author et al. (2008) developed similar works. These authors emphasized the diversified mosaic existing in schools and classrooms nowadays and assume that curricular contextualization can be a means for the development of egalitarian teaching and learning environments, whereby diversity is actually included and taken into account in a careful and promising response to promoting success.

In sum, the articles that support this curricular contextualization focus, all defend that the issue of cultural diversity implies a different care and demand strategies that allow a culturally responsible teaching and learning process and respond to the needs of the classroom.

5th focus: curricular contextualization based on the disciplinary contents

The disciplinary contents are the targets of curricular contextualization and the main elements that need to be transformed, adapted and adjusted. Therefore, it may be expected that they will constitute the basis of an approach to curricular contextualization as shown by the literature review process where 4 articles focus on this fact. This is deeper in relation to specific disciplines seen as problematic, such as chemistry, natural sciences and mathematics. As Sealey and Noyes (2010, p. 239) point out, these disciplines present lower achievement rates and are

rarely seen by students as being useful or relevant for their lives outside the school context.

Braund and Reiss (2006, p. 213) stress that: "It is widely acknowledged that there are problems

with school science in many developed countries of the world. Such problems manifest

themselves in a progressive decline in pupil enthusiasm".

Considering the articles related to disciplinary contents, curricular contextualization

seems to be a useful and promising process that enables teachers to work around subjects that are

hardest for students and make them more understandable and familiar, increasing their meaning

in students' lives.

The authors referred to above and others including Moch (2004) and Murphy, Lunn, and

Jones (2006), conclude that curricular contextualization is able to promote content understanding

and success with regard to extra-school and practical experiences, increasing students' interests

and engagement and, therefore, their success. All articles organized under this focus have in

common the need for new strategies of teaching the disciplinary contents, especially the ones

that appear to be more difficult or particularly tricky for students.

Discussion

Literature revealed that the curricular contextualization conjugates in itself perspectives

and modes of thinking about education that are intended to improve school systems and to

promote success. Specifically, the literature review confirms that the curriculum needs to be

adequate to the context and mostly to students, considering that, by adapting the curriculum to

students' interests, expectations and existing knowledge, one can improve their motivation for

learning and, therefore, their school success. This corroborates the belief that curricular

contextualization aims to achieve educational responses that contemplate and respect the

diversity of situations in order to ensure equality of opportunities and reach more social justice in

education (Connell, 1993). The 5 focuses previously referred to converge on this understanding

of curricular contextualization, specifically when the use of curricular contextualization is

advocated together with the need to adapt curricular contents considering different practices, the

development of teaching and learning strategies based on or developed from, local, social,

cultural or individual aspects.

Considering these focuses, it was possible to establish a definition of curricular

contextualization. Hence, the concept can be defined as *a didactical-pedagogical strategy that*

aims to promote the students school success and the improvement of their learning. This can be

done by adapting curricular contents in order to bring e them closer to students and to the

environment where teaching and learning occurs and, therefore, as a result, making them more

significant and understandable.

Based on the conclusions concerning the concept of curricular contextualization and the 5

focuses through which it can be performed, it was possible to build a map expressing the focuses

of curricular contextualization and their relation with the revised literature. The result of this task

is Figure 1. The map shows the authors who define the concept of curricular contextualization

and how all focuses are interconnected, meaning that curricular contextualization is a process

permeable to various elements. For instance, if a teacher chooses to adopt curricular

contextualization practices focusing on the student, he would most certainly consider some local

features as well, given that the student's identity, interests and history also contain aspects from

the place (culture, habits, and experiences). This interrelation is also present in the revised

literature when the authors who defend a specific focus, through which curricular

contextualization can be developed, also resort to arguments from other focuses. Therefore,

schematically in Figure 1, it is possible to find the same author connected to more than one

focus: the solid line links the author to the focus representing the central idea of his discourse;

and the broken line links to other focuses present in the authors' discourse that are not central but
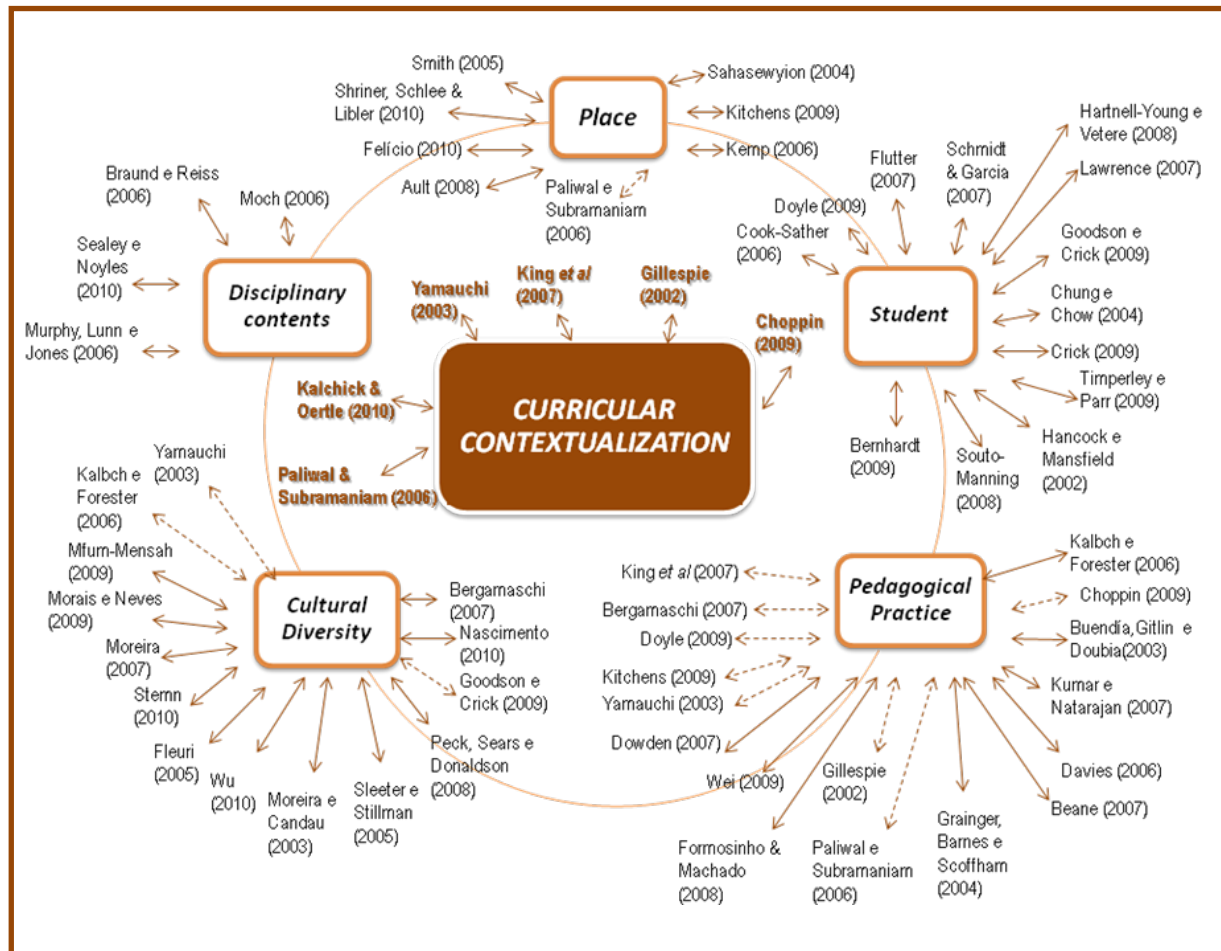
are also relevant.

Figure 1. Map expressing the focuses of curricular contextualization and their relation with the

revised literature

In conclusion, from the literature review performed, it is possible to affirm that curricular

contextualization is generally perceived as a pedagogical approach that promotes and improves

the relationship between students, school knowledge and learning experiences, increasing

students' motivation towards learning and their success.

Despite the potential of curricular contextualization and its presence in some educational

and curricular literature, we believe that this concept and the pedagogical approaches it informs,

needs to be widespread amongst the scientific community concerning education, policy-makers,

teachers and the general community. The dissemination of the concept can help teachers and the

educational and school community to rethink their practices, to unravel new approaches or even

to clarify and support practices already in use. Hence, this paper constitutes a contribution for

increasing the disseminating of the concept of curricular contextualization.

Conclusion and Implications

The literature review process resulted in two main conclusions concerning curricular

contextualization. Firstly, there is no well established, consensual meaning of the concept.

However, examining publications from the last 10 years, it is possible to state its presence within

discourses, perspectives, theorizations and practices.

Secondly, despite the plurality shown in literature, curricular contextualization is seen as

a pedagogical practice that relates teaching and learning processes and curricular content to

students' social and cultural realities and to their previous knowledge. Thus, curricular

contextualization aims to confer meaning on learning, according with the belief which guided

this study.

Furthermore, contextualized practices are seen as a valid pathway for accessing

knowledge and a potential tool for constructing egalitarian educational processes. The literature

review showed that curricular contextualization and its approaches are related to the promotion

of opportunities for success for all students. In this sense, it is possible to corroborate positive outcomes in the use of contextualization while keeping a watchful eye on the idiosyncrasies associated with the transformation of educational practices and systems with particular regard to its demands on teachers, students and administrators. However, there is a need to clarify professional ways of acting as well as relevant means and structures in order to identify the features promoting curricular contextualization, Figure 1 aims to help with this clarification.

Thus, in the never-ceasing search for better ways of teaching and learning, curricular contextualization appears to be a promising way of using a wide range of options on how to conceive and perform school education. Therefore, considering the potential of curricular contextualization, there is a clear need to include it in the curricular development and teaching and learning processes. Thus, it is important to bear in mind the five focuses to be considered when developing curricular contextualization and to integrate them into teachers' pedagogical practices. In this sense, this paper constitutes a reference that teachers and policy makers should take into account when designing and developing the curriculum. At the same time, this paper contributes to establishing the concept of curricular contextualization and forms a basis for its dissemination among the general and educational public, as well as policy makers, enlightening policy development and teacher training.

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