Policy discourses and multi-scalar interactions in curriculum development: Institutionalizing and translating ethnicity/race issues in Brazilian education
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PREFACE

This book is a study of change in education. Its focus is on the ways in which claims of minorities in terms of power are integrated in educational reforms. It thus concerns itself with what is too often left off the agenda, unless driving actors put it on the agenda. The present study, however, goes a step further – questioning what happens after the moment the “alternative” agenda proposed by a minority group is taken up – inquiring as well how the new policy discourse is institutionalized in the political arena, and translated in practices in the school.

Two main interests lie at the heart of this study: an interest in issues concerning the emancipation of minorities, or so-called “subordinate social groups” (Santos, 2001b: 186), and a concern with the possible role of education in this emancipation process. Education is considered a contested field within which different actors try to propagate distinct and sometimes conflicting discourses regarding society. Hence, education is understood as playing a powerful role with regard to the creation but also reproduction of discourses and views that lie at the basis of understanding society, and acting in it.

My interest in such issues dates much further back than the decade I have been living in Brazil. This book argues that, what people do is often closely linked to beliefs, and these in turn are closely linked to personal experience. Hence, my interest in these issues was also triggered by personal experiences. For example, I remember being different compared to the majority of the pupils in the classroom of my primary school in the Amsterdam Bijlmer district. When I was going to primary school this neighborhood began to show a lack of social services, high unemployment rates, and a concentration of social problems. Recently arrived families from the former Dutch colonies of Surinam and the Dutch Antilles, and families from other parts of the world looking for better opportunities found a home in the neighborhood. This experience triggered me, among many others, to reflect on and deal with “being different” and to value others for being so. My interest in issues related to “otherness” was awakened. After secondary school, the opportunity to live in Latin America and work in social and cultural projects made me realize – sometimes in very confronting ways – that I had grown up in privileged circumstances. I also realized that the same context where I grew up and went to school might have entailed a completely different experience for other people around me. Even when I was never very interested in the traditional school subjects in primary education, why did I manage to “make it” in life? And what happened to all my other classmates? Had we received the same opportunities to develop ourselves? I developed a more critical view on the possible emancipatory but often also restricting role of education. Accordingly, a few years later, inequality, social justice, reproduction, and emancipation became central themes throughout my studies in Educational Sciences.

My reflections developed from an interest in the “pedagogy of the oppressed” to an interest in a “pedagogy for the oppressors.” When envisioning the emancipation of minorities, should focus not also go to – changing – the societal structures and processes that make people sharing certain identities, lived realities, and histories become designated “minorities”? These “minorities,” in fact, in many contexts – such as, for example, in the Amsterdam Bijlmer – are not numerical minorities, but groups with less – political – power. Therefore, in this book, I refer to “minorities in power,” meaning minorities in terms of power.

The course “Race, Ethnicity and Education” at the University of Amsterdam offered me the first conceptual tools for studying these specific issues in the contemporary Dutch context. I

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1 I am thankful to Renato Emerson dos Santos, who I first heard using this concept.
investigated discourses in the Dutch press concerning Dutch-Moroccan youth in an Amsterdam suburb and, at a later stage, studied a Dutch teacher training college and the beliefs and practices I found there regarding working in ethnically/racially diverse contexts.

In late 2003 I arrived in Brazil hoping to continue working on similar issues. Soon I realized that, although generally speaking the discussion about education and exclusion was the same, the history of exploitation in Brazilian society was very different than the Dutch one. The ways in which these issues were dealt with were also very different to the Dutch experience. In 2005, the opportunity to continue studying at Rio de Janeiro State University (UERJ) provided me an interesting gateway into Brazil. At the time, UERJ was at the center of the heated societal debate on quota policies for Afro-Brazilian students, as it was the first university to implement such a policy in 2002. The societal debate came to the university in the form of various seminars, debates, and activities organized by black student organizations. I remember finding posters stuck on the walls of the long corridors reading such things as: Brazil is a country of the indigenous, built by blacks for the privilege of whites. I, as a young white Dutch woman, moved about in this field washed in tension. Here I had the chance to meet Brazilian students, lecturers, and scholars, and to participate in ongoing discussions in the field of education. With regard to education, minority issues, and inequality, most attention in media and academia went to the debate on quota policies. Hence, I was surprised when I heard about Law 10.639, a policy initiative that – instead of only focusing on access to educational institutions – also proposed to critically look at the contents of education. I became interested in issues of recognition and tension between this concept and the concept of redistribution. Two years later Law 10.639 became the object of my study, and subject of this dissertation.

At the heart of this study lies the desire to shed light on the issue of recognition of “minorities in power.”2 I started with the idea that recognition of minorities always implies recognition of a majority as well. This thesis seeks to understand the process of curriculum formation and transformation concerning ethnicity/race in contemporary Brazilian education. The focus is on discourses and multi-scalar interactions between different arenas and actors. It sets out the analysis of the process of agenda-setting and implementation regarding Law 10.639 as being a central policy initiative designed with the intention to respond to the situation of the still remaining racial inequalities and exclusion of Afro-Brazilians in education. The policy initiative focuses primarily on the promotion of recognition of (own) identities, history, achievements, and struggles of this part of the population through educational contents. It should be considered complementary to policies that envision addressing institutional inequalities, for example through promoting access of Afro-Brazilians (and other excluded social groups in Brazil) to educational institutions, such as the quota policies in higher education institutions. While the study focuses on Brazil, it is an interest not merely related to that country. I argue that the issue of political manifestation of “minorities in power” (in education and other sectors of society) is in fact currently highly relevant in many parts of the world.

This book is a product of several years of work, and –most of all – a challenging and still ongoing learning process. Now, finalizing my PhD work with this publication, I hope that it inspires the reader to share his or her understanding on issues related to social justice in education

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2 As explained in the introduction of this book: I believe this concept is useful as it clarifies the reference to certain groups as “minorities,” has, in fact, not always to do with a certain group in society being smaller as percentage of the population (this is, for example, the case in Brazil regarding the Afro-Brazilian population). Referring to a certain group as a minority has often much more to do with lack of access of these groups to power, therefore they may be considered “minorities in power.”
in general, and ethnic/racial inequality in particular. In this manner, I hope this book contributes to stimulating further reflection and work on these issues, also in other contexts than Brazil.

The book consists of seven chapters. Chapter 1 is an introduction to the context of the study. Here inequality, race, and education in emerging Brazil are discussed. In Chapter 2 the theoretical framework of the study is presented and the research questions are formulated. Chapter 3 focuses on the design of the research and the methodological choices made. The findings of the study are discussed in Chapters 4 through 6. Chapter 4 examines the agenda-setting process concerning Law 10.639. In Chapter 5 attention goes to the implementation of Law 10.639 in the political arena, and in Chapter 6 recontextualization of Law 10.639 at the school level is discussed. The final chapter of the book (Chapter 7) provides a conclusion. The key findings of the study are highlighted and an attempt to respond the research questions is made.