

Human Rights and Human Rights Education from a Post-Structural Perspective: Meanings and Contexts in Dispute

ARTICLE

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Abstract

This article aims to reflect on human rights, curriculum, and human rights education policies from a post-structural perspective. Based on qualitative research with a theoretical and bibliographical approach, the study analyzes the processes of signification of these concepts as open discursive fields, marked by continuous disputes and reconfigurations. Drawing on the contributions of authors such as Laclau, Mouffe, Lopes, Macedo, Santos, and Piovesan, it argues that both human rights and curriculum should be understood as historical, contingent constructions permeated by power relations. The analysis also draws on Ball and Bowe's Policy Cycle theory, highlighting that educational policy is not a linear process, but a space of reinterpretation, resignification, and resistance. Schools and the individuals who work within them not only implement but also recreate educational policies, highlighting the multiplicity of possible meanings and the impossibility of totalization. The study proposes that a post-structural reading allows us to challenge normative discourses and pave the way for more pluralistic, critical, and difference-sensitive policies.

Keywords: Human Rights. Human Rights Education. Meanings. Curriculum. Context.

Direitos humanos e educação em direitos humanos na perspectiva pós-estrutural: significados e contextos em disputa

Resumo

Este artigo tem como objetivo refletir sobre os direitos humanos, o currículo e as políticas de educação em direitos humanos à luz da abordagem pós-estrutural. Fundamentado em uma pesquisa de natureza qualitativa, com abordagem teórico-bibliográfica, o estudo analisa os processos de significação desses conceitos enquanto campos discursivos abertos, marcados por disputas e reconfigurações contínuas. Com base nos aportes de autores como Laclau, Mouffe, Lopes, Macedo, Santos e Piovesan, defende-se que tanto os direitos humanos quanto o currículo devem ser compreendidos como construções históricas, contingentes e atravessadas

por relações de poder. A análise também se apoia na teoria do Ciclo de Políticas, de Ball e Bowe, destacando que a política educacional não é um processo linear, mas um espaço de reinterpretação, ressignificação e resistência. As escolas e os sujeitos que nelas atuam não apenas implementam, mas também recriam as políticas educacionais, evidenciando a multiplicidade de sentidos possíveis e a impossibilidade de totalização. O estudo propõe que uma leitura pós-estrutural permite tensionar discursos normativos e abrir caminhos para políticas mais plurais, críticas e sensíveis às diferenças.

Palavras-chave: Direitos Humanos. Educação em Direitos Humanos. Sentidos. Currículo. Contexto.

1 Introduction

In this article, we propose a critical reflection on human rights, human rights education, and curriculum through a post-structuralist lens. The theoretical approach adopted here is grounded in the understanding that the meanings attributed to these concepts are not fixed, but historically constructed amid political, social, and cultural disputes. In this sense, we move away from essentialist and universalist perspectives, adopting instead a stance that acknowledges the fluidity of discourses and the contingency of meanings.

The analysis is anchored in the theoretical contributions of authors such as Laclau (2011), Mouffe (2007), Lopes and Macedo (2011), Santos (2009), and Piovesan (2009), whose works allow us to problematize the notion of human rights as a discursive field traversed by power relations and hegemonic disputes. Rather than treating human rights as natural and universal categories, we understand them as discursive constructions that emerge from specific historical contexts and are in constant processes of resignification.

Moreover, this study incorporates the *Policy Cycle* theory proposed by Ball and Bowe (1994) as an analytical tool to understand the formulation, implementation, and reinterpretation of educational policies in human rights. Such an approach enables us to view policy not as a linear process but as a dynamic and relational cycle in which

different contexts—of influence, policy text production, and practice—intertwine and are continually reconfigured.

Methodologically, this is a qualitative study with a theoretical and bibliographic approach. The investigation was conducted through the analysis of books and scientific articles that discuss the central concepts of the study, with emphasis on works that engage with a post-structuralist perspective. This methodological choice is justified by the interpretative and analytical nature of the research object, which demands a critical and contextualized reading of the categories under investigation.

Throughout the article, we seek to challenge the normative discourses present in traditional formulations of human rights and education, highlighting the need for more plural policies—open to difference and sensitive to the multiple voices that shape the educational field. We argue that a post-structuralist reading provides important tools to question crystallized meanings and to create space for the construction of alternative significations that recognize the diversity and complexity of the subjects and contexts involved in educational practice.

2 Historical construction of Human Rights

The historical evolution of human rights can be understood as a process marked by disputes between powers and counterpowers. This duality does not manifest in fixed terms, with each entity permanently occupying a stable position. At every historical moment, the players on this board compete for space and articulate themselves to dominate the discourse of that particular time. Thus, the historical construction of human rights has been characterized by the ongoing attempt to define the term, almost always tied to a notion of universality as something intrinsic to its core.

Bobbio (2004) argues that the greatest challenge does not lie in defining the term itself, but rather in guaranteeing its enforcement, since even the most grandiose declarations are often overshadowed by rhetorical discourse. According to the author, “the rights of man, however fundamental they may be, are historical rights—that is,

they are born in certain circumstances, characterized by struggles in defense of new freedoms against old powers, and they emerge gradually, not all at once and never once and for all" (Bobbio, 2004, p. 9).

4 In understanding the struggles that shaped what we now call human rights, it is necessary to make a temporal digression. Although significant historical events such as the French Revolution of 1789, the American Revolution of 1776, and the First World War of 1914 paved the way for what would later become the need to formulate principles that recognized the protection of human dignity, this text takes as its theoretical reference point the end of the Second World War (1939–1945).

It is worth recalling some of the factors that contributed to what became the largest war in human history: the spirit of revenge among Nazi Germany after its defeat in the First World War and the impositions of the Treaty of Versailles; the heavy militarization of Germany and Italy during the 1930s; the idea of German territorial expansion and control of natural resources; the rise of Adolf Hitler, the Nazi Party, and the ideology of Aryan racial supremacy; and the economic crisis that engulfed Germany after the First World War.

From beginning to end, the war was marked by countless violations, war crimes, and genocides. As Levy and Sznajder (2012) point out when presenting Hannah Arendt's reflections on this historical period:

The Nazis represented the collapse of the Enlightenment and democracy, of critical judgment and reason. The ambivalence between the concepts mentioned above—civilization and barbarism—became the basic principle for organizing her thinking about the Holocaust. For Arendt, Nazism was not particularly Germanic, but rather a manifestation of totalitarianism. Universalizing the phenomenon does not prevent her from recognizing its singularities (2012, p. 265).

Levy and Sznajder (2012, p. 265) assert that the Holocaust "posed a challenge to the universal premises of the Enlightenment, such as reason and rationality" and, paradoxically, "served both as a source for criticizing Western universalism and as a foundation for the cosmopolitan desire to promote human rights universally." The

authors argue that the idea of universality arises not only from reason but also from ordinary human experiences of transgression. After the Second World War – especially with the dissemination of the atrocities committed by the Germans in concentration camps, largely through survivors' testimonies – a new global *ethos* emerged (Elias, 1994), characterized by a collective rejection of war and its resulting tragedies. Within this context, international mobilization grew around the need to ensure that the rights violated during the conflict would be protected by international institutions.

Bobbio (2004) highlights that human rights declarations have gone through three stages or phases. In the first, rights appeared as philosophical theories—individual reflections with limited effectiveness. In the second stage, these theories were incorporated by lawmakers, moving from theoretical discourse to legal practice, thus gaining material expression, even if their validity remained restricted to the states that recognized them. The third stage, inaugurated with the Universal Declaration of 1948, marks the moment when rights assumed a universal and positive character: *universal*, because they apply to all human beings regardless of state recognition; *positive*, because they ensure protection even against actions of the state itself.

One of the tendencies of modern thought is the rejection of foundations based on the supernatural or metaphysical abstractions. In this regard, Comparato (1998, p. 10) observes: "If law is a human creation, its value derives precisely from its creator." Thus, the author asserts, "this foundation is none other than the human being itself, regarded in its substantial dignity as a person, before which individual and group specifications are always secondary" (Comparato, 1998, p. 10).

Para Candau e Sacavino (2013), a promulgação da Declaração de 1948 consolidou, no plano internacional, os princípios orientadores dos direitos humanos. Tratados, pactos e normas que aderiram a esses princípios assumiram o According to Candau and Sacavino (2013), the promulgation of the 1948 Declaration consolidated, at the international level, the guiding principles of human rights. Treaties, pacts, and norms that adhered to these principles committed themselves to their promotion and protection. In Brazil, the 1988 Constitution significantly incorporated this

affirmation of human rights, which resulted in the creation of laws and public policies aimed at their promotion and defense.

Lynn Hunt (2009, p. 209) emphasizes that the human rights project, conceived in the aftermath of totalitarian regimes, marks the internationalization of the human person by fostering “an international consensus on the importance of defending human rights. The Universal Declaration is more the beginning of the process than its culmination.” Comparato notes that subsequent normative texts have incorporated this foundation:

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, opens with the statement that ‘all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights’ (Art. 1). The *Constitution of the Italian Republic* of December 27, 1947, declares that ‘all citizens have the same social dignity’ (Art. 3). The *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany* of 1949 solemnly proclaims in Article 1: ‘The dignity of man is inviolable. To respect and protect it is the duty of all state authority.’ Likewise, the *Portuguese Constitution* of 1976 begins by declaring that ‘Portugal is a sovereign Republic based on the dignity of the human person and on the popular will, committed to building a free, just, and solidary society.’ The *Spanish Constitution* of 1978 affirms that ‘the dignity of the person, the inviolable rights inherent to it, the free development of personality, respect for the law, and for the rights of others are the foundation of political order and social peace’ (Art. 10). The Brazilian Constitution of 1988, in turn, establishes ‘the dignity of the human person’ as one of the fundamental principles of the Republic” (Comparato, 1998, p. 11).

Given its relevance to the realization of human rights principles, the Universal Declaration – initially conceived as a guideline – gradually acquired binding legal status and is now considered a code of conduct for member states of the international community. The 1948 Declaration was signed by 48 countries during the United Nations General Assembly, while the Vienna Declaration later garnered the adhesion of 171 nations, demonstrating significant progress toward international consensus in defense of human rights.

To consolidate the guarantees established by the 1948 Declaration, two major legal instruments were subsequently developed: the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural*

Rights. Both were adopted in 1966 but entered into force only in 1976. The former establishes a broad range of civil and political rights that signatory states commit to respect and ensure for all individuals under their jurisdiction. The latter recognizes that economic, social, and cultural rights are equally fundamental to the full realization of human dignity, assigning to states the duty of promoting them progressively and continuously.

As previously mentioned, the 1948 Declaration, later reaffirmed by the *Vienna Declaration on Human Rights*, paved the way for the discussion and codification of the *indivisibility of human rights*. Piovesan explains:

The integral view of human rights – that is, the declaration integrates the catalog of civil and political rights with that of economic, social, and cultural rights – thus establishes a relationship of interdependence, interrelation, and indivisibility. They not only stand on equal footing but depend on one another. There is no true freedom without equality, just as there is no true equality without freedom (Piovesan, 2006, p. 108).

In general, it is within this holistic and integral perspective that the contemporary conception of human rights is situated. Although subject to criticism and tension – particularly from the intercultural perspective advocated by authors such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Vera Maria Candau – the idea of universality in human rights continues to inhabit the (un)conscious collective. In this work, we aim to provoke reflections on the multiple voices – both global and local – that give meaning to the term. We proceed from the understanding that the meanings of human rights are established provisionally and contingently, through disputes and negotiations. To explore these voices and their diverse interpretations, the following chapter presents the main forms of meaning attributed to human rights.

3 The disputes over the meaning of Human Rights

Historically, the quest for a stable meaning of what constitutes human rights has sought to anchor this definition in a universalizing framework. In this view, the sole and unquestionable premise for being entitled to such rights would simply be the condition of being human. The principle of the indivisibility of rights is also embedded in this conception, since, under this understanding, the violation of one civil right, for instance, would represent the violation of all rights.

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Human rights, or the rights of man, are, in modern terms, understood as those fundamental rights that belong to a person by virtue of being human, by virtue of their very human nature, and the dignity inherent to it. These rights do not stem from a concession of political society. On the contrary, they are rights that political society has the duty to enshrine and guarantee (Herkenhoff, 1994, p. 30).

Another hallmark of modernity reflected in the concept of human rights is the notion of dignity:

The provision of fundamental human rights is directed primarily toward the protection of human dignity in its broadest sense, as a spiritual and moral value inherent to the person, which manifests uniquely in the conscious and responsible self-determination of one's own life and carries with it the claim to respect from others. It constitutes an inviolable minimum that every legal system must ensure, such that only in exceptional cases may limitations be imposed on the exercise of fundamental rights, and even then, never in disregard of the necessary esteem owed to all people as human beings (Morais, 2003, p. 229).

Bobbio (2004) notes that the notion of the universality of human nature is ancient, but in the West, this idea was amplified by Christianity and, in the modern era, by *jusnaturalism*¹. It was during this period that the philosophy of the universality of human nature became a political institution, culminating in the declaration of rights at the end of the eighteenth century. Human rights, as a universalist ideal, are grounded in their absolute applicability to all individuals, without any prerequisite other than being

¹ *Jusnaturalism* is a conception based on the idea of *natural law*, that is, it holds that there exists a form of law independent of human will, universal and unchangeable.

human. In other words, the only condition for these rights to be guaranteed, whether at the national or international level, is belonging to the human species.

From another perspective, relativism emphasizes that values, behaviors, and cultural appreciation are the results of cultural heritage (Laraia, 2005). Franz Boas (1858–1942) broke with ethnocentrism² by proposing relativism as a way to challenge the hierarchy of cultures and to recognize cultural differences. For Boas, there is no such thing as a right or wrong culture, developed or underdeveloped, primitive or advanced; there are only different cultures, each with its own distinct worldview.

One of the most forceful critiques of the universalist idea of human rights lies in the recognition that their concept is founded on an anthropocentric worldview, which is not shared by all cultures. Another criticism stemming from this universal character is that the very notion of human rights is deeply tied to Western values. Santos argues that as long as human rights are considered universal, “they will tend to operate as a globalized localism and, therefore, as a form of hegemonic globalization” (2009, p. 13). To overcome this impasse, the author proposes a conceptualization of human rights as multicultural:

It is well known that human rights are not universal in their application. Are human rights, as a cultural artifact, a type of cultural or transcultural invariant, part of a global culture? My answer is no. Only Western culture tends to formulate them as universal. In other words, the issue of universality is a particular issue, a specific issue of Western culture (Santos, 2009, p. 13).

Reflecting on the tension between universalism and relativism, Piovesan (2009) proposes an alternative path by presenting the idea of a “multicultural conception of human rights inspired by intercultural dialogue that shapes an emancipatory multiculturalism” (2009, p. 109). From this conflict, the author argues that “rationality and resistance” would constitute “the only emancipatory platform of our time” and that, since human rights are not given but constructed, likewise “their violations are also

² a worldview characterized by the belief that one's own ethnic group, nation, or nationality is socially more important than all others.

constructed, that is, violations, exclusions, injustices, discriminations, and intolerances are a historical construct that must be urgently deconstructed" (Piovesan, 2009, p. 113).

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At this point, we align with Piovesan in understanding that meanings are constructed within specific historical contexts. It is in this sense that we approach the notion of what human rights are. We suggest that the proposed resignification can be effective if the concept of human rights, in addition to being broadened and updated, can also follow a new direction, being recontextualized through references that move away from the universalizing construct. We go further, proposing, inspired by Fernandes and Lopes (2024), that there is no transcendental principle capable of fixing once and for all the meaning of human rights. According to the authors:

There would thus be no possibility of closure of meanings that renders them univocal [...], considering the existence of countless experiences and theories that claim such status, preventing any one of them from encompassing the multiple meanings derived from other competing notions, given its conceptual or experiential limitations (Fernandes; Lopes, 2024, p. 33).

This floating signification, within the articulatory chain that either exhausts or empties its potential, refers to the idea of "empty signifier" proposed by Laclau (2011). In these terms, we argue that reality is not fixed, nor are meanings determined by structure, since every structure is decentralized. What we understand as human rights is constantly traversed by different tensions that produce and reproduce meanings continuously. These meanings emerge as the result of disputes over the control of interpretation in time, reflecting in different authors and discourses a variety of demands and purposes.

4 Reflections on the idea of curriculum in Human Rights

To engage in reflections on the curriculum in human rights, we begin by affirming that we do not assign to it any intrinsic characteristic. We consider the

agreements surrounding the meanings of the term as partial and established contingently. Thus, we adopt a significant radicality that goes beyond merely recognizing and valuing difference, understanding it instead as constitutive and irreducible. In this sense, we break sharply with the widely accepted view of curriculum as a guide that includes workload, syllabi, class schedules, and teaching plans.

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As Lopes and Macedo (2011) emphasize, this definition of curriculum carries within it several implications. The first concerns its prescriptive nature, as it is “seen as the planning of activities carried out by the school according to objective and scientific criteria” (2011, p. 26). This dynamic involves two interconnected but distinct moments: planning and implementation. Secondly, both curriculum and school are understood as instruments of social control. According to the authors, “from this perspective, harmony and social progress are also fostered within the school” (2011, p. 27). Furthermore, they highlight the view that curriculum should not be seen merely as a set of contents and skills to be transmitted to students, but also as an instrument through which dominant ideologies perpetuate their worldviews, thereby maintaining structures of power and social inequality.

In light of this, Lopes (2015) proposes understanding curriculum policies as disputes over the meaning of what curriculum is. To do so, it is necessary to break away from rationalist approaches, whether liberal or otherwise, and instead embrace the decentralization and radical contextualization of all curricular policy.

The fixed utopian purpose of social change, such as a society without power or classes, a society without inequalities or conflicts, or any other analogous utopian construction, is abandoned or at least replaced by contextual and localized agendas, impossible to enumerate. The impossibility of articulating or listing such contexts lies in the fact that these contextual agendas are constituted and transformed within the very movement of politics itself (Lopes, 2015, p. 447).

In the field of curriculum, post-structuralist approaches provide fertile ground for dialogue. As Lopes and Macedo (2011) explain, this theoretical perspective gained traction in Brazil at the end of the 1990s through the translations of Tomaz Tadeu da

Silva. Post-structuralism, often confused with postmodernity, brings together authors who engage with structuralism, adopting some of its premises while challenging others.

In the same direction, Lopes (2015) proposes dialogue with Derrida's concept of deconstruction. Deconstruction is not a method, but rather a logic of the text. According to the author, "to work with deconstruction is to be open to the event, to admit the translation that every text entails, the deferral present in every reading" (2015, p. 450). Laclau and Mouffe, in turn, inspired by deconstruction, affirm that meanings cannot be determined by linguistic or social structures. By reactivating discourses, sedimented truths are unsettled, revealing antagonisms and the contingency of possible alternatives: "to reactivate discourses is simultaneously to unsettle what has been sedimented, established as objective, as foundation, as full presence, and to bring forth antagonisms and the undecidable, contingent nature of alternatives" (Lopes, 2015, p. 450).

If there are stabilized foundations defining what constitutes a curriculum in human rights, our interest lies in questioning how these foundations are constructed and whose interests sustain them. Drawing on the Lacanian idea of the university as a "signifier always in retreat," as proposed by Lopes and Macedo (2006), we understand the curriculum in human rights as an object of continuous dispute, in which different social groups seek to institutionalize their worldview as universal. This antagonism is not a problem to be overcome but a constitutive part of the struggle for meaning itself.

In this sense, attempting to fix cultural meanings as universal, in the name of a reason that seeks to legitimize them as the best for a curriculum, reveals a hegemonic dispute in which a particularity aspires to the status of universal. Understanding this "universal" as provisional and changeable, always the result of political negotiation, is crucial to the establishment of new hegemonies. As the authors affirm, "to attempt to fix the meanings and significations of culture as universal, *a priori*, in the name of a reason that seeks to legitimize them as the best for a given curriculum, is part of a struggle for hegemony in which a particularity seeks to ascend to the category of universal" (Lopes and Macedo, 2006, p. 43).

Just as the curriculum is not fixed, the subject is also not stable in post-structuralism. The category of “subject” is conceived as incomplete, ambiguous, and decentered. According to Laclau and Mouffe (2015, p. 198), “the category of subject is imbued with the same ambiguous, incomplete, and polysemic character that overdetermination assigns to every discursive identity.” Macedo (2006) emphasizes that the positions occupied by subjects result from processes of resignification and displacement of meaning, which occur in a context marked by multiplicity, fragmentation, and the ambiguities of contemporary life.

From this post-structural understanding of the subject, it is not a matter of destroying identities but of abandoning any intrinsic meaning that is predetermined or fixed by structure:

A desstructured structure cannot do this. The social, as an open structure, allows subjects an infinite and non-directional set of identifications, and this is what we understand as the decentered subject. This is a subject whose possibilities of identification are neither exhausted nor complete; it is neither this nor that (essential), nor this and that in different moments and situations (historical), but neither this nor that simply because this and that do not exist in any stabilized form (Lopes; Macedo, 2011, p. 229).

It is by renouncing certainties, embracing doubt, and viewing openness to meaning as a productive space for thinking about the subject, the curriculum in human rights, and human rights themselves, that we anchor our reflections in this text. Considering the curriculum in human rights beyond what is established in documents such as the *National Plan for Human Rights Education (PNEDH)*, post-structuralism allows us to question the hegemonic discourses embedded in the formulation of such policies.

However, even when a policy gains centrality, it represents only a provisional moment of fixation. Lopes and Macedo (2011, p. 229) observe that such provisionality may last for centuries, but it remains the result of political dispute, in which the articulation of demands and groups seeks to establish hegemonies.

Finally, by adopting post-structuralism as our theoretical framework, we understand that discussing the curriculum in human rights requires recognizing the

plurality of possible readings. From this perspective, we propose reflecting on curricular policy through the *Policy Cycle* theory of Ball and Bowe (1994), which will be addressed in the following section.

5 Teaching Human Rights: considerations within the policy cycle theory

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Lopes and Macedo (2021) propose addressing curricular policy from a discursive perspective, understanding the educational field as a space of political action and recognizing the school as the place where politics takes shape. According to the authors, “our challenge is to think about public policy in curriculum, understanding curriculum as a signifying practice, as a space-time of meaning production” (Lopes and Macedo, 2021, p. 5).

Drawing from a post-structural reading grounded in Laclau and Mouffe, who conceive structures as fluid, open, and decentered, the authors assert, “we distance ourselves from political studies that claim to establish a final and fundamental meaning for the curriculum, or to elaborate foundations capable of enabling, once and for all, a given signification of the educational” (Lopes and Macedo, 2021, p. 1).

It is in this search for meaning, established through contested struggles in which, once meaning is temporarily fixed, its provisional nature becomes evident, that we understand the curriculum in human rights. With this motivation, we suggest reflecting on the recontextualization of policy, understanding it as the product of continuous reinterpretations and discursive readings. Much of the theoretical production on curriculum policy begins by separating the contexts of production and implementation of official documents. The *Policy Cycle* approach, proposed by Ball and Bowe (1994), seeks to understand policy as both text and discourse. In this framework, the text is understood as a symbolic representation that can be encoded and decoded in various ways, subject to multiple influences and operating at different levels of legitimacy (Lopes and Macedo, 2006).

According to this approach, schools occupy a central role in political articulations, not merely as sites of implementation. They also produce policies, interpret texts, and establish connections among discourses. Ball et al. (2016, p. 201) state:

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Schools are not a single piece. They are precarious networks of different and overlapping groups of people, artifacts, and practices. Schools consist of collections of different teachers, managers, treasurers, pedagogical assistants, counselors, administrators, students, parents, governors, and others, who inhabit various ways of being with different forms of 'training,' discursive histories, epistemological worldviews, and 'professional' commitments".

This understanding challenges the notion of curriculum policy as *top-down* and also distances itself from "the distinction between policy and practice as two instances polarized between domination and resistance, action and reaction" (Lopes and Macedo, 2006, p. 38). However, deconstructing these binary blocks does not produce a third one that resolves the issue, but rather provides "another way of understanding policy that incorporates the meanings of practice and, in this way, conceives the interpenetrations and blends between domination and resistance, as well as the ambivalences within discourses" (Lopes and Macedo, 2006, p. 37).

The *Policy Cycle* theory proposes three interdependent contexts for the analysis of educational policies: the context of influence, the context of policy text production, and the context of practice. As Mainardes (2006, p. 50) explains, "These contexts are interrelated, have no temporal or sequential dimension, and are not linear stages. Each of these contexts presents arenas, spaces, and interest groups, and each involves disputes and confrontations."

Lopes and Macedo (2011) affirm that these contexts interweave as public and private arenas of action. Within the school context, policy texts are shaped by interactions among various actors and the school's own identity, intertwined with local demands and historical and social processes. Thus, the school cannot be seen merely as a repository or the final stage of policy implementation.

The context of influence refers to the space where policies are conceived and political discourses are formulated. Within it, interest groups compete to define the social purposes of education and what it means to be educated. As Mainardes (2006, p. 51) explains:

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Within this context operate social networks inside and around political parties, government, and the legislative process. It is also in this context that concepts gain legitimacy and form a foundational discourse for policy. The emerging discourse is sometimes supported and at other times challenged by broader principles and arguments that exert influence in public arenas of action, particularly through the mass media. Moreover, there is a set of more formal public arenas, such as commissions and representative groups, that can serve as spaces for articulating influence.

In the case of human rights policies, Santos (2009) argues that their formulation after the Second World War was, in many cases, driven by the economic and geopolitical interests of hegemonic capitalist countries. According to the author:

The liberal Western mark of the dominant discourse on human rights can easily be identified in many examples: in the Universal Declaration of 1948, drafted without the participation of most of the world's peoples; in the exclusive recognition of individual rights, with the sole exception of the collective right to self-determination; in the priority granted to civil and political rights over economic, social, and cultural rights; and in the recognition of the right to property as the first and, for many years, the only economic right" (Santos, 2009, p. 14).

However, even though disputes for legitimization occur within the context of influence, such definitions are constantly recontextualized by nation-states. For Mainardes (2006, p. 52), the migration of policies on a global scale does not imply mechanical transfer, since "policies are recontextualized within specific national contexts."

The context of policy text production involves the actions of multiple agents, including technical experts, parliamentarians, jurists, legislators, specialists, and consultants. The texts resulting from this process represent the policy itself and take various forms, such as legal documents, speeches, official or unofficial statements,

and institutional videos. Mainardes (2006, p. 52) notes that “such texts are not necessarily internally coherent or clear, and they may also be contradictory.”

We reiterate the central idea of this approach, which views policy formulation as cyclical, meaning that these contexts are constantly interrelated. “When official curricular definitions are produced, they incorporate meanings and significations from both practice and the international context of influence” (Lopes and Macedo, 2006, p. 40). Within these reinterpretations, arrangements, and connections, negotiations over the meanings of policy occur across all contexts of this cycle.

Finally, the context of practice refers to the space where policies take material form. It is the moment when actions unfold, and policy texts are interpreted and resignified. As Mainardes (2006, p. 53) explains, “The context of practice is where policy is subject to interpretation and recreation and where policy produces effects and consequences that may represent significant changes and transformations in the original policy.”

Professionals working in schools are not mere “implementers” of policy. On the contrary, they reinterpret and recreate policies based on their experiences, knowledge, and contexts. Santos (2016, p. 271) supports this idea by stating that “as a proposal, when it reaches schools, this policy is resignified and recontextualized through hybridity by the education professionals working there. The teacher, in their teaching function, has, for example, the freedom to recreate and reinvent it.”

We consider that the strength of the *Policy Cycle* theory lies in the idea that, despite the coercive nature of policy texts and attempts to impose interpretative limits, reinterpretations inevitably occur across different contexts, shaped by the diversity of readers and the multiplicity of possible interpretations. Moreover, when reflecting on the tensions between the global and the local in the dispute for meaning, interpretations that view policy texts in a strictly vertical way fail to account for their flexibility, possible significations, and the heterogeneity of the social.

This is the perspective we embrace: the articulations of human rights education policies are unpredictable and open to multiple meanings. Although state

influence in guiding policy can be felt within the context of practice, there is no infallible mechanism capable of constraining the reinterpretations and resignifications that occur across contexts, within schools, classrooms, and teaching practice.

6 Final considerations

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In this article, we sought to establish a theoretical dialogue with the post-structuralist perspective regarding the meanings attributed to human rights, human rights education, curriculum, and educational policies. We understand that the post-structuralist approach, by recognizing the instability of meanings and the decentering of structures, allows for a more fluid, critical, and contextualized reading of these themes, which are conceived as fields in constant dispute and reconfiguration.

We began our discussion with a historical overview of human rights, taking the 1948 Universal Declaration as a reference point. Far from treating the document as an endpoint, we sought to problematize it as a product of ideological and geopolitical disputes that, while affirming the universality of rights, bear the marks of Western thought and an ideal of humanity that fails to encompass the cultural and epistemic diversity of peoples.

Subsequently, we reflected on the multiple attempts to give meaning to human rights through notions such as dignity, universality, or human nature. Drawing on Laclau (2011), Piovesan (2009), and Santos (2009), we argued that these meanings are always partial, provisional, and shaped by hegemonic struggles. The concept of the *empty signifier*, proposed by Laclau, helped us understand that the meanings attributed to human rights are neither fixed nor definitive; rather, they fluctuate within the articulatory chain, being continuously reinterpreted by different discourses and interests.

In the same movement, we discussed the curriculum in human rights not as a fixed and prescriptive set of contents and practices, but as a field open to the dispute over meanings, influenced by historical, social, and political contexts. In dialogue with

Lopes (2015) and Lopes and Macedo (2011), we understood curriculum as a signifying practice and a field of symbolic struggle, where different worldviews and societal projects confront one another. Deconstructing its supposed neutrality opens space to conceive curricular policies not as closed prescriptions, but as provisional articulations that seek to fix meanings amid diversity and instability.

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The *Policy Cycle* approach proposed by Ball and Bowe (1994) provided an important analytical lens for understanding educational policy as both text and discourse, highlighting the multiple contexts of influence, policy text production, and practice within which policies are formulated, reinterpreted, and recreated. This approach rejects the linear and hierarchical logic of policy formulation and implementation, recognizing that school actors not only receive policies but also reinterpret them in light of their experiences, knowledge, and institutional contexts.

Throughout the text, we sought to question hegemonic constructions of human rights and their educational policies through the lens of decentering, emphasizing the theoretical and political potential of indeterminacy and contestation. We believe that this perspective not only broadens the understanding of human rights and curriculum but also provides tools for resisting the totalizing and homogenizing tendencies inherent in normative discourses.

To recognize human rights, human rights education, and curriculum as fields permeated by power relations, multiple voices, and contingent meanings is, therefore, a fundamental step toward building educational policies that are more just, plural, and open to difference. It is within this space of uncertainty and negotiation, inherent to political and social experience, that we situate our reflections and positions.

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