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The *National Common Core Curriculum* in Brazil: the power of knowledge linked to music

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the *National Common Core Curriculum* in Brazil, focusing both on its *Introduction* and the sections dedicated to music teaching. The paper draws on contributions from broad critical curricular perspectives, arguing for the access to *powerful knowledge* as a means of achieving social justice and democratic social relations. It outlines some aspects of an ongoing qualitative research project, which investigates the recent curricular debates about the consistent inclusion of music in the primary and secondary levels of schooling in Brazil. Preliminary results suggest that the *Base Nacional Comum Curricular (BNCC)* relying on the development of pragmatic and generic competencies, is very far from promoting access to the pivotal *epistemic structures* of the discipline. At the same time, we hope to raise awareness about the potential *powers* provided by musical knowledge, which might help the Brazilian music education field to strengthen its curricular and epistemological bases.

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Introduction and justification

The issue of *school knowledge* is currently a crucial topic of discussion in Brazil, due to the recent development of a document designed to form the basis of national curricula. The *Base Nacional Comum Curricular (BNCC)* is expected to guide the production of curriculum propositions across the Brazilian states and municipalities. This paper contextualises the discussion of *school musical knowledge* within an analysis of the *BNCC*.

The construction of the *BNCC* (Brasil, 2018) has been vehemently supported, among others, by the *Movimento pela Base Nacional Comum (Movement for the Common National Base)*, which defines itself as ‘a non-governmental and non-partisan group of people, organizations, and entities that since 2013 dedicates itself to the cause of the construction and implementation of the *BNCC*’.¹ In the official documents of Brazilian Ministry of Education, as well as in the *Movement for the Common National Base*’s campaigning acts, it is often argued that the *BNCC* has been the object of

a wide and democratic discussion throughout its elaboration. Such actors mention, in this sense, the critical readings made by experts, the public consultation opened to the public on the preliminary version of the BNCC, as well as public hearings organized in all regions of the country.

Moreover, the *Movement for the Common National Base* highlights in its website that the necessity of a national curriculum is mentioned by Brazilian legal documents since at least the 1980s:

The BNCC is foreseen in the 1988 Constitution, in the Guidelines and Bases Act of 1996, and in the National Education Plan of 2014. **Having defined the learning and common developments for all students helps to guarantee equity** (the student will learn what is essential, regardless of where he/she studies); it also **provides more coherence to the educational system**: teacher training, teaching materials, and external assessments start to respond to what is learned in schools – and not the other way around. It is worth remembering that BNCC is not a curriculum, therefore **the specificities and local diversities can and should be preserved** in the curricula of the local educational systems, in the pedagogical projects of schools, and in teachers' practices within classrooms.² (Free translation, emphasis added)

The passage above synthesises the arguments favorable to the BNCC, which are endorsed by some professionals within the Brazilian educational field (Costin, 2018; Castro, 2018; Mello, 2018): the document is considered to be an instrument to guarantee equity, promoting at the same time a more integrated action of educational policies towards a quality education. Furthermore, by not asserting itself as a curriculum, the document would leave space for the expression of the specificities of distinct regions, schools, and subjects.

However, the BNCC was not so easily received, being the object of intense discussions since the beginning of its construction, in 2015 – primarily by researchers in the fields of curriculum and educational policies (Alves, 2014; Macedo, 2015, 2019; Ribeiro, 2019; Ribeiro & Craveiro, 2017). According to Galian and Silva (2019, p. 530), these discussions underline some aspects: the very need for a curricular reform has been insufficiently sustained; achieving a national basis in such a huge and diverse country might be an impossibility; the construction of the document has been rushed, insufficiently discussed, and politically biased; the document tries to control teachers' actions and choices and plainly ignores all the pedagogical work that the schools have already been carrying out. Overall, educational researchers point out that the BNCC is very likely to cause pernicious effects both in regards to pedagogical processes and teacher training.

A brief look at the broader political context might help to grasp these debates. The BNCC (Brasil, 2018) has been forged within a rather tense political background, which has produced deleterious consequences in all social fields in Brazil. This context, which included the loss of labour rights and the weakening of social security, has proved to be particularly

detrimental to education, as some authors pointed up (Cássio, 2019; Ferretti, 2018; Giroto, 2019). One can clearly identify the power exerted by the supporters of the BNCC in this debate – private foundations, institutes, and political parties –, whose main concerns are linked to the formation of individuals able to deal with the unstable traits of the current social and political context. Individuals that, based on their *competencies* and *skills* and hardly relying on some assistance from the State (which is continuously ‘diminished’), might guarantee their survival. Also cherished by this group of supporters is the search for foreign curricular models taken from the ‘developed nations’, proposed as magic solutions to the complex challenges of Brazilian education. The widespread optimism held by such supporters, as well as their underlying economic motivations and designs, have been clearly expressed:

In the mainstream press, consultants linked to business foundations and institutes predict the future of Brazilian Education under the BNCC. Optimistic, they vehemently praise the new curriculum policy since before 2015. The public debate concerning the Basic Education’s curriculum is held in the “Economic Market” sections of major newspapers. All of them produced favorable articles on the BNCC, as did the media specialized in economics [...].

[...] the *Movimento Todos pela Base Nacional Comum* [“All for the BNCC” Movement] has influenced national debates since 2014, and galvanised connections among the mandatory national curriculum, the world of large-scale assessments, and the textbook and pedagogical advisory industry in Brazil. (Cássio, 2019, pp. 15-16, free translation).

Tarlau and Moeller (2020, p. 554) also highlight the role of the BNCC’s supporters, as well as its rushed process of governmental elaboration and approval. Such aspects are associated with what these authors call a ‘philanthropic consensus’, that is,

when material resources, knowledge production, the power of the media, and both formal and informal networks, are all used by private foundations in order to obtain a consensus among multiple social and institutional actors in support of a given public policy, despite significant tensions – transforming the public policy in question into a widely accepted initiative.. (Tarlau & Moeller, 2020, p. 554)

Like mentioned before, these intense debates around the BNCC took place amidst a quite turbulent political scenario, which deepened when the current Brazilian President was elected in 2018. Countless actions have been undertaken under his authority which express a flagrant disregard for the Federal Constitution issued in 1988, leaving the bases of the young Brazilian democracy gravely undermined. As to education, a glaring contempt mingles with symbolic and material violence, assuming a form of a censorship which aims to reintroduce values linked to some conservative notions of ‘family’ and ‘morality’ – a censorship whose enemies are clearly defined:

teachers, along with all the knowledge they mobilise throughout the course of educational levels.

Our ongoing research aims to investigate the curricular foundations of the Brazilian music education field, mapping the different forms whereby *school musical knowledge* has been conceived during the past few years – a period intensely marked by discussions about the BNCC. We intend to identify how the content to be taught is commonly selected and justified, as well as what is, if any, the degree of consensus within the field on such issues. This article represents a preliminary step, discussing the main guidelines of the common core curriculum itself. Regarding Brazilian musical pedagogy, this study seeks to contribute to the epistemological debate: to intensify the discussions that endeavour to overcome both the technicist curriculum perspectives and the approaches marked by the emphasis on everyday knowledge.

The technicist perspectives have exerted a strong and lasting influence on Brazilian music education (Pereira, 2013a). These conservatory-like approaches have also been identified as influencing the construction of music textbooks used in schools throughout the twentieth century (Pereira, 2016). Such perspectives are commonly based on fixed, mechanical and formal exercises, and tend to express an almost subservient respect for European musical traditions, parameters, and repertoires, at the expense of the students' cultural references (Luedy, 2006, 2009). These sorts of views have long been criticised, but are very far from being overcome (Aquino, 2016). One can verify studies dedicated to denouncing the persistent dominance of conservatory-like and decontextualized traits in several areas related to musical formation in Brazil – including both the basic education³ and the teacher training in higher education (Pereira, 2013b; Queiroz, 2017).

Meanwhile, some authors call attention to the widespread influence currently exerted within the scope of musical pedagogy by theories centered on everyday knowledge and daily experiences. Benedetti and Kerr (2008, 2010) point out that one must be very cautious when criticising the so-called formal and traditional teaching: they warn us not to completely neglect issues connected to technical rigour and the transmission of theoretical concepts. Camargo (2018), in turn, argues vigorously for a deeper examination regarding daily musical experiences. According to him, the repertoire more readily available to be accessed by the young often follows the aesthetic parameters of the culture and entertainment industry – and must, therefore, be carefully scrutinised and critiqued. These authors question a perceptible tendency within the Brazilian music education field to compare the role of the school to that of any other instances of socialization (such as the media, the family, the church, the neighborhood etc.). In this sense, both Benedetti and Kerr (2008, 2010) and Camargo (2018) provide an alert: by equating the

musical instruction received at school with musical experiences lived in any spaces of everyday life, such pedagogical approaches might – even if inadvertently – delegitimize content transmission and pedagogical work itself.

Adding to this scenario, some authors report the lack of well-established curricular discussions within the Brazilian music education field. In this sense, despite the constant consolidation of the field in recent decades, some gaps are considered as challenges to be tackled by researchers. Sobreira (2014), for example, points out that music pedagogy researchers have not yet consistently engaged in a constructive dialogue and in-depth curricular debates with authors from broad curricular perspectives. Del-Ben and Pereira (2019) note that the absence of solid curricular thinking concerning the primary and secondary levels of schooling generates enormous difficulties for music teachers, primarily the novice ones, who do not know exactly *what* and *how* to teach. And Aquino (2016) observes the subsidiary way with which Brazilian researchers tend to address the knowledge that is supposed to compose the school curriculum: according to her, *school musical knowledge*, along with its features and specificities, still remains obscure and undefined.

With a view to strengthening these discussions that link *music* and *basic education*, this research takes a distinct theoretical approach. On the one hand, we reject the instrumentalism and conservatism of conservatory-like perspectives and on the other, we establish a key distinction between *disciplinary-based knowledge* and *everyday knowledge*. We aim to bypass the various forms whereby constructivist and postmodern conceptions appear in the contemporary musical pedagogical debate, namely: culturally relativistic perspectives that are centered on the everyday knowledge of students, their interests and experiences, their abilities in learning to learn and their creative spontaneities. Despite heartily conveying progressive and democratic intents, the wide dissemination of such premises is likely to undermine the schooling process itself if it does not also provide equal access to profound artistic and cultural goods (Young, 2007, 2011, 2013; Young & Muller, 2016).

To effectively provide this access, we argue that the schooling process must first rely on disciplinary-based knowledge, systematised within the different fields. In other words, it must rely on *powerful knowledge*. By *powerful knowledge* we do not mean lists of facts and information but conceptual forms of meaning that are specialized and differentiated from everyday thinking. Thus, due to its specialization and abstraction, *powerful knowledge* has the potential to empower students to broaden their critical understanding of the world (Young & Muller, 2013). Considerations about the musical knowledge as *powerful knowledge*⁴ underpin in this article our comments and critique of the BNCC. We intend to focus on aspects that might have been disregarded to some extent by the researchers so far. Above

all, we aim to fortify the movement whereby the Brazilian music education field is urged to widen its range of themes and research approaches.

Theoretical framework

The research draws on authors who seek to figure out the paths and tensions currently experienced by the debate about *school knowledge*. Young (2011, 2013) discusses the pervasiveness of a certain *fear* of knowledge, making it an intimidating and almost anachronistic concept. Such fear, by detaching knowledge from its central role in education, helps to compose what Libâneo (2012, 2016) identifies as the *perverse dualism* of the current Brazilian public school. Libâneo refers to the deepening of the radical opposition between two types of school: the *school of knowledge* (linked to the solid acquisition of scientific and cultural goods and aimed at the children of the wealthier classes) and the *sheltering school* (aimed at the children of the working classes, and devoted to nothing but the socialisation among students and the development of useful competencies). According to Libâneo, the educational policies adopted over the past twenty years in Brazil must be critically examined. Despite their seemingly democratic and humanistic premises, such policies might have legitimised this dual pattern of schooling, whereby the poorest social classes are kept away from paramount cultural and intellectual contents.

Hoadley (2018) compiled a series of studies that analysed recent curriculum reforms carried out in developing countries. Such processes are rooted in a wider set of reforms that have taken place since the 1980s. In her study, Hoadley could delineate a set of characteristics that marked the official discourse in all of them – characteristics which are expressed to some extent also in the Brazilian context since the late 1990s. The author indicates:

In many countries changes in curriculum and teaching methods were proposed, and proposals generally were for the promotion of learner-centred (or child or student-centred) pedagogies, constructivist methods or curricula. The intention in almost all cases was to replace content-driven curricula by objectives-based, process-driven or outcomes-based curricula. [...] The student in these curriculum types was often cast as a consumer who was able to choose, transfer and accumulate learning outcomes. Knowledge was atomized and commodified and choice was maximized. (Hoadley, 2018, pp. 13-14).

According to Hoadley, one can notice other common traits among such curriculum reforms: they stress the inclusion of values, attitudes, and skills as opposed to subject-based knowledge; they emphasise the inclusion of local knowledge and ways of understanding; finally, they express a move towards integrated curricula (Hoadley, 2018, p. 14). This landscape outlined by the author evokes the development of official curriculum proposals in Brazil since the late 1990s: a process that seems to gain even stronger colours

with the BNCC, whose foundations are linked to the notions of competencies and skills – including socioemotional ones – as well as to an instrumental approach to knowledge.

The process described above shows similar features in curriculum reforms developed in different countries⁵ – although, of course, the specificities of each context are maintained. This, within the curricular field, was accompanied by what Young (2013) defined as a ‘crisis’. According to the author, one of the symptoms of this crisis in curriculum theory is the fact that knowledge has been turned almost into a taboo in academic research. Scholars have been showing less and less interest in knowledge itself – that is, in *what* is actually being taught and learned in schools. Such critique echoes arguments put forward by Moraes (2003) when analysing the intense *retreat of theory* in the educational field. In her paper, Moraes (2003) notes a significant reversal of the theoretical deepening in the field, in favor of a certain idealization of everyday knowledge, practices, and experiences. Such movement, which she characterized as being a kind of *intellectual reverse gear*, would end up separating school and educational research from theoretical/systematized/profound knowledge.

The above-mentioned expressions (*retreat of theory*, *fear of knowledge*, *sheltering school*) offer a general outlook on the issue of school knowledge. All the authors on which this study draws have a central premise in common: it is the school’s first social function to provide access to non-common sense knowledge, under the perspective of complementing and/or overcoming everyday and spontaneous ways of thinking. In Bernsteinian terms, it is a matter of enabling access to the *esoteric world*: by promoting contact with abstract and disciplinary-based knowledge, the school favours the development of complex and relational thinking, thereby prompting students to question their current conditions of existence. It is only in this way that these individuals will have, in the future, the possibility to access the realms of the *unthinkable* and the *not yet thought* (Bernstein, 2003).

Such perspectives seem to converge with the universalist argument about the school curriculum as proposed by Forquin (1993, 2000). According to this author, the teaching contents transmitted by the school must fit with the notion of *public knowledge* – keeping away, thus, both from merely practical/useful knowledge and everyday knowledge available in the course of ordinary life. Forquin seems to strive, primarily, to reconcile the respect for issues of diversity and multiculturalism with the imperatives of universalism: with the responsibility of the school as a transmitter of a wider culture. Accordingly, carrying out the educational project implies enabling everyone the access – in a democratic and open universalist perspective – to exemplars taken from the most relevant, profound, and enriched elements ever produced by the various human cultures.

We use certain lenses of analysis derived from the work of Basil Bernstein (1998, 1999, 2003), and which have been developed and advanced within *social-realism* (Maton & Moore, 2010). Aligned with the social-realist reasoning, Wheelahan (2010) thoroughly examines the three dominant curricular conceptions (constructivism, conservatism, and neoliberal instrumentalism), deconstructing their philosophical and epistemological bases. She reveals how these three perspectives establish complex and unusual relationships among themselves, marked by plain opposition as well as by affinities and overlapping principles. Wheelahan points out, within this entanglement, a central common point: the depreciation of disciplinary knowledge. Such perspectives seem to disregard the potential benefits offered by conceptual/specialized/abstract knowledge to individuals, by deepening their ways of thinking, feeling, and understanding the social practices in which they are involved. In different ways, all three aforementioned conceptions have an instrumental approach to knowledge, mobilizing it in a context-dependent and pragmatic way.

Drawing on social-realist ideas, this paper argues for a *disciplinary-based approach* which bypasses the three dominant perspectives examined by Wheelahan (2010): the constructivist perspectives, commonly based on everyday musical knowledge and experiences; the conservatory-like discourses, with all their conservatism and technicism; and the neoliberal approaches based on the development of useful musical competencies and procedural musical skills. By providing access to specialized knowledge, the school empowers students to engage in the debates held about society itself: to engage in the *society's conversations*, in the suggestive image used by Wheelahan. Epistemic access becomes, thus, a central category in the social-realist approach: the search for greater equality in terms of life opportunities involves, unavoidably, the careful definition of what will count as 'knowledge' in the curriculum.

Objectives and methodology

The content analysis (Amado, 2014; Bardin, 2016) is adopted as one of the tools in the organisation and interpretation of the text of the BNCC. The approach is predominantly qualitative. Based on the Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) (Maton, 2014), the thematic analysis seeks to unveil which are *the bases of knowledge claims* mainly argued by the documents.

Legitimation Code Theory, a branch of social realist perspective, aims to develop some of the categories created by Basil Bernstein, advancing the understanding of the knowledge produced and legitimised in education. The analytical model developed by LCT seeks to reveal the principles that, being dominant in a given field (intellectual, educational, artistic), determine the meaning of 'success' and 'achievement' there. The practices and

beliefs of the agents are taken as messages that represent such underlying bases, expressing which are the ‘rules of the game’ and the measures of success within the field. (Lamont & Maton, 2010)

Such principles of success can be schematised through four *specialization codes*, namely: a *knowledge code*, where legitimacy draws on the acquisition of disciplinary-based knowledge and specialized procedures; a *knower code*, based on the learners’ personal attributes, such as their everyday knowledge and context-dependent experiences; an *elite code*, when all of these aspects are highly valued; and a *relativist code*, where neither disciplinary-based knowledge (*what you know*) nor everyday knowledge and personal dispositions (*the kind of knower you are*) has any importance (Maton, 2010, 2014). To clarify these concepts, some examples might be helpful. A music curriculum based on a *knowledge code* would favour specialized concepts and contents, such as those involved in musical analysis, composition, and the understanding of music history (e.g. the different phases and musical transformations perceived throughout the history of Jazz). When based on a *knower code*, the curriculum would forefront the personal involvement and personal attributes of learners, such as their expressive capacities (to improvise, to expose their inner feelings and perceptions), as well as their cultural values and social background. In its turn, a curriculum characterised by an *elite code* would emphasize both this capacity for personal expression and the demonstration of specialised contents and skills (e.g. a performance on a musical instrument being both technically accurate and communicatively expressive). At last, the curriculum would not offer clearly defined guidelines when based on a *relativist code*: it would aim to promote an open, inclusive, and general ‘engagement’, so that each student could express his/her thoughts and feelings in his/her own way.

Using such theoretical lenses, the guidelines offered by the BNCC, as well as the discourses within the Brazilian music education field, can be examined. Taking such *codes* as analytical categories, the content analysis aims to grasp the different conceptions about what the *legitimate musical knowledge* might be. As for the BNCC, the analysis aims to identify some of the emphases expressed by the document: whether its main concerns are related to the acquisition of specialised musical knowledge and procedures, or the development of students’ personal involvement, expressiveness, and creativity; or even, whether they aim for a balance between these dimensions or do not consider any of them as a priority. To this end, we mapped excerpts from the text which explicitly express aspects related to such codes, in their various emphases and nuances. We worked with 29 (twenty-nine) excerpts in total – 9 (nine) taken from the general *Introduction* of the BNCC, 11 (eleven) from the section dedicated to music teaching in the Elementary School, and 9 (nine) from the section dedicated to artistic teaching in

Secondary School. These extracts have been classified, and their main contours will be exemplified and discussed in the next session.

We focused on these parts of the document because in them we consider it possible to recognize aspects concerning the discussion here intended: the general principles that support the document as a whole (which are made explicit in the general *Introduction*), as well as the aspects more closely related to the curricular component *Art* in the Elementary School and to the *Languages and their technologies* in the Secondary School, within which the musical language and contents are addressed by the BNCC. Accordingly, this paper does not take as an object of analysis the sections of the document dedicated to the following *areas of knowledge*: Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Human Sciences, and Religious Education; nor does it address the sections devoted to other school disciplines, such as Portuguese Language, History, Geography, Physical Education and Religious Education.

It is important to note that the thematic analysis based on the *specialization codes*, far from producing a fixed and static categorisation, or from providing final answers and conclusions, aims to sketch some perceptible movements and trends within the field. We hope to provide a sketch that might be helpful in pointing themes, approaches, and objects of study mostly overlooked or dismissed by the researchers so far.

Finally, we underline that such *specialization codes* are part of a wider intellectual movement: a larger Bernsteinian tradition that includes other authors whose categories were vital to the analysis carried out here (such as Michael Young, Ursula Hoadley, Leesa Wheelahan, and Graham McPhail). These authors' central concern is to identify and discuss, across the different curricular dimensions and manifestations, as well as in the different stages of formal and non-formal education, the unequal distribution of knowledge to students. Overall, thus, we underscore the contributions offered by the social-realist framework. By focusing on the *powers* of disciplinary-based musical knowledge, the Brazilian music education field might find a fruitful means to strengthen its curricular and epistemological bases, especially with regards to the sought-after links between music education and basic education.

Results and discussion: insufficiency of disciplinary knowledge in the BNCC

The BNCC claims to signal what the students should learn from Early Childhood Education to Elementary and Secondary Schools. This paper focuses on the conceptions and guidelines conveyed by its general *Introduction*, as well as by the sections of the document dedicated to music teaching in Elementary and Secondary Schools. Preliminary analyses indicate that its curricular design is far from promoting a *knowledge code* based on *powerful* musical knowledge and specialised musical procedures. It

is important to note that, for the very first time, Brazilian educational legislation has a document with such legal and symbolic power: throughout the states and municipalities, all the locally constructed curriculums must comply with BNCC's central guidelines.

In its *Introduction* (Chapter 1, p. 7–22), one can note that the BNCC does not assume any pedagogical perspective, nor does it offer bibliographical references. Within the text, different statements seem to fit in with different curricular approaches, apparently to please diverse readers or interest groups. Thus, eclecticism appears to be an important trait of the *Introduction*. It does not reassure either the educators aligned with the centrality of disciplinary-based knowledge or those primarily associated with constructivist approaches and everyday knowledge. Instead, its central axis seems to revolve around long lists of competencies and abilities to be developed by the students – the neoliberal outcomes-based instrumentalism, as discussed by Wheelahan (2010). With a view to understand the instrumentalist thrust of the BNCC, the definition of *competence* presented in its *Introduction* might be worth reading:

Throughout basic education, the essential learnings defined in the BNCC must compete to ensure the development of ten general competencies for students, which, in the pedagogical scope, embody the rights of learning and development. At BNCC, competence is defined as the mobilization of knowledge (concepts and procedures), skills (practical, cognitive, and socioemotional), attitudes, and values to solve complex demands from daily life, from the full exercise of citizenship, and from the world of work. (Brasil, 2018, p. 8, free translation)

The option of taking the competencies as the major organizer of the entire curriculum, as well as the definition transcribed above, allow us to hypothesize: for the BNCC, as well as for its groups of supporters, it is not relevant to discuss the knowledge that might underpin the development of such competencies. As for the selected knowledge, its potential for the students' intellectual development is not as vital as its usefulness in the most immediate life. Instead of wondering about the *knowledge that*, the document solely focuses on the useful *know-how-to* (McPhail, 2020).

In this sense, the depreciation of specialized knowledge stands out. Most of the *Ten General Competencies* put forward in the *Introduction* do not refer to knowledge itself. And even when they do, it is in a quite generic and pragmatic way. We can comment, for example, on the first two competencies, which presumably refer to knowledge of the different fields represented by curricular subjects:

- (1) To value and utilize the knowledge historically built on the physical, social, cultural, and digital world, to understand and explain reality, keep on learning and collaborate to build a fair, democratic and inclusive society.

- (2) To exercise intellectual curiosity and resort to the sciences' own approach, including research, reflection, critical analysis, imagination, and creativity, to investigate causes, elaborate and test hypotheses, formulate and solve problems, and create solutions (including technological ones), based on the knowledge of the different areas. (Brasil, 2018, p. 9, free translation)

As for *competence 1*, which recommends *valuing and utilizing historically constructed knowledge*, we might ask: is that an effective guideline? By proclaiming that knowledge should be *valued* and *utilized*, can this competence be helpful for teachers and curriculum writers in selecting what will be taught? *Competence 2*, in its turn, links some specific scientific procedures to the solving of problems and the finding of solutions. We do not undervalue that one should be able to solve problems in possession of the school knowledge. However, by choosing the knowledge meant to be didactically addressed solely by this aspect, we might reduce too much what can be expected from the curriculum.

In the item *The legal frameworks that support the BNCC*, the document claims to be about 'designating something common, that is, what students should learn in Basic Education, which includes both knowledge and the ability to mobilize it and apply it' (Brasil, 2018, p. 12). Despite mentioning the *knowledge*, generic *abilities* seem to constitute the main concern of the document, as openly stated in the following excerpt:

Through a clear indication of what students should "know" (considering the constitution of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values) **and above all, what they should "know how to do"** (considering the mobilisation of these knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values for solving complex demands of everyday life, the full exercise of citizenship and the world of work), the explicitness of competencies offers references for the strengthening of actions that ensure the essential learning defined in the BNCC. (Brasil, 2018, p. 13, free translation, emphasis added)

The *Introduction* expresses, thus, a pragmatic and utilitarian approach to curricular knowledge. Besides, within its *Ten General Competencies*, the last four emphasise socioemotional competencies. Claiming to respond to the challenges of contemporary society, and supposedly in tune with the new global scenario, they underline skills such as cooperation, conflict resolution, resilience, and the sharing of personal meanings and experiences. (Brasil, 2018, pp. 9–10)

Brazilian researchers have been debating the conceptions and roles attributed to the teaching of the Arts, regarding both the Elementary and the Secondary Schools (Mota et al., 2018; Pereira & Loponte, 2019). Amidst the severe criticisms made of the final version of the BNCC, these writers observe: the authoritarian mechanisms adopted by the Brazilian

government, given that the final version of the document utterly neglects the discussions carried out within the various disciplinary fields; the fragile status granted to the artistic languages (music, visual arts, drama, dance), seen at the very most as distinct ‘thematic units’ and, therefore, vulnerable to impoverished and superficial interpretations; the reductionist pedagogical perspective assumed by the document by entirely basing itself on the concepts of *competencies* and *skills*. Overall, researchers have been denouncing the manifold risks potentially posed by such a document. Adhering to its central lines, music education practices might continue to be threatened by the deflation of specific content, thereby doomed to occupy a marginalized role in the development of Brazilian students (Del-Ben & Pereira, 2019; Santos, 2019).

In *Chapter 4, section 4.1.2* (pp. 193–211), the BNCC addresses the Arts in Elementary School, focusing on the teaching of Visual Arts, Music, Drama, and Dance. Some introductory remarks of this section openly suggest students’ everyday knowledge, social backgrounds, and personal attributes – thereby being in consonance with a *knower code*. In certain passages, the pronounced vagueness of the BNCC even suggests a *relativist code*. The following extract, for example, foreshadows such indeterminacy:

The expansion and the production of musical knowledge involves the perception, experimentation, reproduction, manipulation and creation of diverse sound materials, **from the closest to the most distant from the students’ musical culture**. This process allows them to experience music interrelated with diversity, as well as to develop musical knowledge that is fundamental for their critical and active insertion and participation in society. [...] In summary, the Art component within the elementary school articulates cultural manifestations from distinct times and spaces, **including students’ artistic surroundings as well as the cultural and artistic productions that are contemporary to them**.

[...]

Thus, it is necessary to recognize **the diversity** of artistic knowledge, experiences, and practices **as legitimate ways of thinking, experiencing and appreciating the arts**, which forefronts the social and political character of these practices. (Brasil, 2018, pp. 196-97, free translation, emphasis added)

The curriculum selection process undeniably entails the recognition of cultural diversities, especially in a country as vast as Brazil. Thus, it must always be attentive to the local identities, building on and expanding the values and references carried by the students. However, such broad and indistinct guidelines lead us to question: which *diversity* should be recognised as *the legitimate way of thinking, experiencing, and appreciating the arts*? Which artistic productions and musical repertoires might be entitled to be part of the curriculum? Should any musical manifestation be considered as *legitimate* as any other? Anything goes, regardless of their aesthetic

features and their profoundness as cultural productions? Furthermore, given that such legitimation encompasses the *closest repertoires* and the usual *surroundings* of the students, we may ask: what is the difference between specialized and everyday knowledge? Do they have the same meaning within the curriculum making process? And, if anything goes, how is the teacher supposed to determine the contents that either *should* or *should not* be addressed?

The following excerpt, also taken from the section dedicated to Elementary School, indicates:

(EF15AR13) To identify and critically appreciate a diversity of forms and genres of musical expression, recognising and analysing the uses and functions of the music in a plurality of contexts of circulation, **especially those connected to daily life**. (Brasil, 2018, p. 203, free translation, emphasis added)

Following the previous line of reasoning, we might ask: how is the musical formation supposed to effectively broaden the students' aesthetic and critical understandings? Is that a feasible goal, given that school musical practices, repertoires, and productions involve *especially those connected to daily life*? The document contains some orientations that might certainly help outline the curriculum making process. However, and as has already been highlighted by Camargo (2018), such orientations are at risk of being completely diluted. The sheer lack of criticism and definition, the absence of aesthetic and artistic parameters, is likely to restrain such moments of musical *appreciation* and *analysis* within the boundaries of only everyday knowledge and experiences.

The pages of the document are also neglectful regarding musical concepts considered paramount. On the whole, they offer lists of generic skills and broad competencies, and are non-specific in relation to specialized knowledge and contents. As an example, the following extract states:

(EF15AR17) To experiment with improvisations, compositions and the links between stories and their sounds, by means of voices, corporeal sounds and/or musical instruments, either conventional or unconventional, involving individual, collective and collaborative practices. (Brasil, 2018, p. 203, free translation)

Drawing on the theoretical references mentioned earlier in this paper, one can note that such lines are very far from being based on the *generative principles*⁶ and *epistemic structures* of the subject – that is, on a *knowledge code*. Instead, they furnish broad competencies related to what the students are supposed *to do*, rather than concepts and contents which might support their actions. This list of suggested activities, whereby students are encouraged to 'improvise', 'compose' and 'manipulate', is enlarged afterwards:

(EF69AR23) To experiment with improvisations, compositions, arrangements, jingles, soundtracks, among others, by means of voices, corporeal sounds and/or musical

instruments, either acoustic or electronic, either conventional or unconventional, involving individual, collective and collaborative practices. (Brasil, 2018, p. 209, free translation)

What is the aesthetic difference between an *improvisation*, a *composition*, and an *arrangement*? Which are the possible connections among these three different modes of music-making? Which disciplinary concept and expressive understandings should a teacher draw on when teaching students to compose a melody, create a rhythm, or improvise a soundscape? The document completely bypasses this sort of epistemic discussion: it doesn't enquire about the knowledge that might bolster such *experimental engagement* and enrich such moments of musical *appreciation* and *manipulation*. When outlining which contents could make it possible for the students to *analyse*, to *improvise*, to *compose*, and so on, the BNCC doesn't go further than mentioning some basic elements of the music and /or the sounds:

(EF15AR14) To notice and explore the basic elements that constitute the music (pitch, intensity, timbre, melody, rhythm etc), by means of games, plays, songs and an array of practices related to musical composition/creation, execution and appreciation. (Brasil, 2018, p. 203, free translation)

The aforementioned aspects assume even stronger contours in *Chapter 5*, when the BNCC addresses the Secondary School. In *section 5.1* (p. 481–526), the document presents the area of *Language and its technologies*, expressing an integrated approach to the different *languages*, namely, Portuguese, English (as a foreign language), Physical Education, and Arts. At the opening of the section, the general guidance on artistic learning is placed as follows:

Aesthetically appreciate the most diverse artistic and cultural productions, considering their local, regional, and global characteristics, and mobilize the knowledge of artistic languages to give meaning and (re)build individual and collective authorial productions, exercising protagonism in a critical and creative way, concerning the diversity of knowledge, identities, and cultures. (Brasil, 2018, p. 490, free translation)

Reading this section, one can verify that the document only makes generic mentions to the 'artistic languages', scarcely citing the term *music*. Besides, when it comes to the musical formation of youngsters between 15–17 years old, the very few allusions that can be found follow the same pattern: vast and vague competencies, urging the students to 'participate', 'to create', 'to act creatively', and so on. The following are some examples:

(EM13LGG602) Aesthetically enjoy and appreciate diverse artistic and cultural manifestations, from local to global ones, as well as participate in them, in order to continuously sharpen sensibility, imagination, and creativity.

(EM13LGG603) To act in individual and collective creative processes, in different artistic languages (visual arts, audiovisual, dance, music, and theater) and at the

intersections among them, using aesthetic and cultural references, knowledge of different natures (artistic, historic, social, and political), and individual and collective experiences. (Brasil, 2018, p. 496, free translation)

The document, thus, keeps neglecting knowledge: it furnishes students neither with substantial aesthetic references nor strong conceptual and critical tools. Quite the opposite: musical knowledge, along with its specificities, is utterly diluted within the area of *Language and its technologies*. Nonetheless, students are encouraged to ‘share’ and ‘evaluate’ their cultural preferences and experiences:

(EM13LP21) Collaboratively produce and socialize commented playlists of cultural and entertainment preferences, cultural magazines, fanzines, e-zines or similar publications that disseminate, comment and evaluate music, games, series, movies, comics, books, plays, dance performances etc. [...]. (Brasil, 2018, p. 511, free translation)

In summary: the document seems to fit in with a *knower code* (the musical activities and repertoires strongly linked to the students’ everyday knowledge, preferences, and social background), at times even with a *relativist code* (guidelines that are indeterminate, culturally relativist, and aesthetically uncritical). Besides, the document emphasises procedural musical skills, rather than theoretical and conceptual knowledge: it underlines what the students might *do* rather than what they should *know*.

It is important to clarify exactly what our argument means in favour of access to knowledge. It is by no means related to what Young (2011) has called ‘a curriculum of compliance’: the encyclopedic accumulation of fixed and immutable facts and content, valued for themselves, and rigidly determined in advance. Despite being based on portions of disciplinary-based knowledge, such approach would only reinforce the conservatory-like perspectives: the continuous enactment of pedagogical practices absolutely negligent regarding students’ expressive, creative, and cultural potentials. Thence its conservatism and authoritarianism: such sort of disciplinary-based curriculum would only perpetuate an elitist musical tradition, unfortunately still widespread within the Brazilian context, whereby a very restricted repertoire (the European musical tradition from the 18th and 19th centuries) is taken as a fixed canon and transmitted in an also restricted way, aiming at a little group of students taken as especially ‘talented’ and ‘gifted’. Wheelahan (2010) clarifies that the conservatism of these technician curricular perspectives rests upon their not being as much concerned with *knowledge* in its own right – its attributes, its epistemic traits, its conceptual properties and potentials – as with its use as a tool in the preservation of social hierarchies and stratifications.

As we hope to have made clear throughout this paper, that is by no means the kind of *disciplinary foundation* being envisaged here. Rather, and

drawing on Wheelahan (2010), we argue that the contents organised and systematised in the different school subjects acquire their meaning and value as bearers of *concepts* – which are, in fact, the core category for learning. In the social-realist perspective, valuing knowledge does not refer to the content itself, but rather to the democratic access to a paramount capacity: the ability to regard the world conceptually. Accordingly, it is not a content-based, but a *concept-based approach*.

Conclusion

According to Bernstein (2003), disciplinary and specialized concepts enable the development of critical thinking. They furnish students with the means to wonder about new possibilities of life, thereby going beyond the domains of everyday knowledge. That's why they matter so much in the curriculum. Working within the Bernsteinian framework, Bolton (2006), Maton (2010, Maton, 2014), Lamont and Maton (2010), McPhail (2013, 2014, 2015, 2017), and McPhail and McNeill (2019) are examples of works that contextualise the discussion about *powerful knowledge* within the disciplinary fields. Possible solutions to the problem of finding a balance between sociocultural and specialized knowledge could involve, according to these authors, the critical and flexible adoption of cultural traditions. They argue for the constitution of *canons* which, fulfilling their pivotal role as guides of curricular construction, are always understood as being historical, transitory, partial, modifiable. Regarding this critical approach to the concept of *canon*, says McPhail (2014, p. 128):

[...] arguments concerning epistemological value can be extended beyond the realms of classical music to exemplars in any style of music. What is required for education is a flexibly evolving 'canon' that teachers use to guide students to a critical awareness of the music judged most compelling within given musical practices, genres, styles, and cultures.

Once again, that intense link between *epistemic access* and *democratic effectiveness* is suggested. According to this group of authors, the establishment of judgment criteria in education is not just an epistemological issue: it responds, above all, to an imperative of *social justice*. The provision of equal formative opportunities for all young people implies that principles, concepts, and general purposes should be debated within the communities that constitute the disciplinary fields: such baselines must be discussed, outlined, agreed upon, and explained to students. Thus, the main challenge for teachers and policymakers in education is achieving a balance between the necessary recognition of each field's wide diversity and the essential epistemic decision-making.

Underlying our research is a vital tension between essentialism and relativism, that is, the yearning for artistic judgments that are neither absolute nor arbitrary. This view aligns with the interfaces between school and culture as put forward by Forquin (1993, 2000): the search for a certain open and democratic universalism. It is a theoretical effort to speculate what it might be to provide, within education, access to aesthetically and epistemically *powerful knowledge* – an effort that permeates the work of all the authors mentioned in this paper, delineating the development of the ongoing research. In short: the construction of a student identity – familiar with the great concepts developed in the field, empowered regarding internal debates within the knowledge areas – is a prerequisite for all individuals to actively engage in that society's conversation.

McPhail (2013, 2014, 2015, 2017) discusses the various ways whereby that tension manifests itself in the field of music education: the debate between an essentialist stance and a random extreme, between a dogmatic universalism and a radical particularism. As a possible solution, he suggests a focus on the generative concepts and the intercultural systems of meaning that are crucial to music as a school subject: one must certainly be attentive to the cultural references brought by the students, but incorporating them into a curricular structure forged on concepts collectively considered paramount and powerful within the field. We saw that, according to Young (2007, 2011), the essential feature of powerful knowledge would be to challenge students' routine experiences, enabling them to reach new levels of intellectual development. This might be expressed, in musical language, by means of a curriculum that comprises both *affirmation* and *dissonance* in relation to particular and everyday experiences (McPhail, 2013, p. 18).

From the elements offered by McPhail (2013, 2014, 2015, 2017) and McPhail and McNeill (2019), we can outline the possible organisation of a musical curriculum whose horizon points to the appropriation of the language's epistemic structure. The central concern of the field should be the establishment of core concepts, principles, and styles: core *powerful knowledge* which, due to its intrinsic features, should be guaranteed to everyone. Accordingly, the curriculum design could not rest, by any means, on the musical preferences and particular opinions of each teacher, each school, each institution. Although necessarily involving dialogue with local contexts, the central axis of the curriculum must revolve around what has been collectively achieved over time by the communities that constitute the field – the knowledge that, due to its capacity for generalization and abstraction, to its *verticality*, can lead students beyond their personal and local experiences.

In summary, we argue it is necessary to find a balance between the *social* and the *epistemic*: building knowledge along with the students but introducing

them to the conceptual structures considered as fundamental within the field of music education. This is an extremely difficult balance to be reached, especially in a field as susceptible to the dynamics of social/cultural/communicational transformation as is the field of Music. Nevertheless, it must occupy our central attention: a balance to achieve both the recognition of *cultural identities* and the maintenance of music's *epistemic integrity* as a discipline. Such reflections help us to concatenate the curricular discussions that we have outlined in this paper, locating them in the particular field of music education. The social-realist theoretical framework suggests, thus, fruitful paths of development for this ongoing research, directing our view on the debates that correlate musical knowledge and curricular policies in Brazil.

Notes

1. Available at: <https://movimentopelabase.org.br/quem-somos/>. Access in: 12/03/2021.
2. Available at: <https://movimentopelabase.org.br/duvidas-frequentes/>. Access in: 12/03/2021.
3. By *basic education* we mean the compulsory schooling process in Brazil, which comprises three different segments: Child Education (for children aged from 0 to 5 years and 11 months), Elementary School (for children aged between 6 and 14 years old), and Secondary School (for youngsters between 15 and 17).
4. In this paper, we use the terms *disciplinary*, *specialized*, and *powerful* knowledge interchangeably.
5. It is relevant to mention that the competency-based reforms carried out in Brazil are located within a broader global (and transnational) discourse around competencies and outcomes, as we can identify in some international documents, for example: OECD (2018). The Future of Education and skills. Education 2030. The future we want. ([https://www.oecd.org/education/2030/E2030%20Position%20Paper%20\(05.04.2018\).pdf](https://www.oecd.org/education/2030/E2030%20Position%20Paper%20(05.04.2018).pdf)); Global Partnership for Education (2021). 21st Century Skills: What potential role for the Global Partnership for Education? A landscape review (<https://www.globalpartnership.org/sites/default/files/document/file/2020-01-GPE-21-century-skills-report.pdf>).
6. By *generative principles* we mean the knowledge that offers conceptual understanding, thus being able to generate the production of new knowledge. For example, key structures in the process of composition, which might enable a wider range of expressive tools in the creation of new music.

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