The global spread of the neoliberal paradigm has propelled a recent worldwide trend of educational decentralization/centralization policies. Such policies constitute a contradictory ensemble that has shifted authority and accountability across national, provincial or state, municipal, and school levels. They have also been marked by contestation over the extent to which curricula are nationally standardized or locally defined. Education reform in Brazil in this regard has been shaped by a confluence of neoliberal and critical theoretical currents: enhance the nation’s economic competitiveness in the global market and redress pressing societal issues. Using Basil Bernstein’s concepts of classification and framing together with critical educational scholars’ conceptualizations of knowledge and knowledge in the official and enacted curriculum as conceptual and theoretical frameworks, this comparative ethnographic case study examines the nexus between curriculum, knowledge, and pedagogy in municipal schools in Brazil’s Northeast. In doing so it addresses gaps in comparative educational research on curriculum knowledge along with how educational decentralization/centralization policies are implemented in practice. The central thesis is that municipal school curricula knowledge dynamics—the classification and framing of knowledge in the official curriculum and the relation of such with what knowledge is legitimized in classrooms, how such is transmitted and analyzed, and why—in Brazil’s Northeast encompass a multilevel web of contradictions. This web spans incongruent
ideologies, opposing elements of autonomy and accountability, conflicting pedagogical
principles and practices, and a chasm between curriculum ideals and urban periphery municipal
school realities.
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Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Introduction

My interest in focusing my doctoral research on municipal school curricula in Brazil’s Northeast stems from my six years as a teacher across three continents. These experiences have enhanced my awareness of the bridge spanning education policy and curriculum as well as given me firsthand insight into the complexities of and contextual influences on the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy nexus. They have also taught me the importance of supplementing observations with teachers’ perspectives of their pedagogical principles and practices in order to better understand what happens in classrooms and why. Two experiences stand out in this regard.

My work as a university instructor in one country was particularly informative with respect to the connections between education policy and curriculum, including the impact on testing, teaching, and learning. There, tests for certain courses were designed by administrators who were unfamiliar with the curriculum. The tests did not parallel what was taught and learned. Rather they were created and administered to support the institutional policy that 33% of students in each class must fail and retake courses and exams in order to ensure a certain university income each academic year. In the event that the tests did not yield this target percentage, teachers had to randomly fail a number of students. As a result, teachers were expected to lie to students about their course performance. Teachers were fired if they refused. The cycle repeated itself since a percentage of those who retook the courses and exams were failed a second time, again to guarantee income.

On a different but related note, the central curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy tension I have negotiated has been the conceptualization of the official curriculum as predetermined
knowledge and the enacted curriculum as the teacher transmission of this knowledge. For instance, my work as a “teacher trainer” in another country was evaluated according to how closely it paralleled a checklist of obligatory techniques posted in classrooms. Though I recognized benefits of the espoused pedagogy, the focus on teacher actions conflicted with my pedagogical beliefs. Namely, it dictated interaction patterns and defined the boundaries of whose and what knowledge was engaged with and how in class.

What’s more, the post-observation conferences with a supervisor were mostly one-way feedback sessions comprising the observer’s perceptions of my teaching as mapped against practices I was to employ. Not only did the observer’s perceptions of my teaching occasionally differ from mine, the observer’s views also did not speak to why particular dynamics occurred given that how I made sense of what happened in class and why was not part of the evaluation. This made me cognizant of the implications for using observations and interviews in educational research to minimize the possibility of misunderstanding and misrepresenting pedagogical practices.

Finally, the pedagogical practices modeled by the trainers were somewhat incongruent with the realities in public and private schools. While interactive, “communicative” teaching and learning methods were endorsed in the program, some student teachers mentioned that in their own middle and high school classes they were expected to take on more authoritarian roles and prepare students for tests. They also cited additional institutional constraints and deeply entrenched traditions of schooling.
1.2 Curriculum Knowledge Dynamics: Neoliberalism, Education Policy & Curriculum

These experiences have shaped my interest in examining *curriculum knowledge dynamics*: the organization and treatment of knowledge in the official curriculum and the relation of such with what knowledge is legitimized in the enacted curriculum realm of classrooms, how such knowledge is engaged with, that is how it is transmitted and analyzed, and why. Though my focus is on the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy nexus, the notion of curriculum knowledge dynamics acknowledges the continually shifting interplay between world trends and education systems. Tensions and contradictions between global tendencies and local variations in school–society relations reflect the “dialectic of the global and the local” (Arnove, 2003, p. 1). This includes relations among transnational forces, national and sub-national education policies, curriculum, and contextual realities (Arnove, 2003; Broadfoot, 2000; Crossley, 2000; Hayhoe & Mundy, 2008; Marginson & Mollis, 2002; Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006). My study unveils intricacies across these dynamic connections.

A powerful global influence is neoliberalism. Neoliberalism can be understood as an economic conception of democracy (Apple, 2006). Neoliberal thought regards the market as the most important element to protect in that society should function according to the principles of the economy (Apple, 2006; Klee, 2008; Stromquist, 2003; Torres, 2002). Neoliberalism has shaped the restructuring of the relationship among states, institutions, and societies as well as impacted education policy and practice throughout the Americas and elsewhere in recent decades (Apple, 2006; Arnove, 1997, 2003; Basu, 2004; Canen & Grant, 1999; Derqui, 2001; Fischman, Ball, & Gvirtz, 2003; Gadotti, 1997; Gandin, 2007; Giroux, 2004; Henales & Edwards, 2002; Hypolito, Vieira, & Pizzi, 2009; Kempner & Jurema, 2002; Klee, 2008; Leistyna, 2007; Lopes
& Macedo, 2003; Marcondes, 1999; Narodowski & Nores, 2003; Puiggrós, 1999; Rivarola & Fuller, 1999; Schugurensky, 2003; Stromquist, 2003; Torres, 2002). Concerning education, schools are recognized as institutions for benefitting the economy and are held accountable for meeting a society’s global economic competitive needs (Apple, 2003, 2006; Broadfoot, 2000; Canen & Grant, 1999; Derqui, 2001; Fischman et al., 2003; Giroux, 1988; Stromquist, 2003). School or curriculum knowledge is conceptualized as a predetermined commodity to be acquired for creating a productive labor force and stimulating economic growth (Apple, 2003, 2006; Canen & Grant, 1999; Giroux, 1988; Marcondes, 1999).

Neoliberalism has been a primary propulsion behind the recent worldwide wave of educational decentralization/centralization policies. Numerous scholars have documented this phenomenon in the Americas and other regions (Astiz, Wiseman, & Baker, 2002; Bjork, 2003; Bray, 2003; Derqui, 2001; Gvirtz, 2002; Gvirtz & Beech; 2004; Hypolito et al., 2009; Karlsen, 2000; McGinn & Street, 1986; Meade & Gershberg, 2008; Narodowski & Nores, 2003; Osei, 2010; Prawda, 1993; Rivarola & Fuller, 1999; Schiefelbein, 2004; Schugurensky, 2003; Tatto, 1999; Whitty, Power, & Halpin, 1998). This has entailed shifting functions and degrees of authority, autonomy, and accountability with respect to educational financing, governance, and quality of provision from the central state to provinces or states, municipalities, and schools (Derqui, 2001; Zadja; 2004). It has also consisted of struggles for control over the curriculum, including what is taught and the extent to which a curriculum is nationally standardized or locally defined (Astiz et al., 2002; Hypolito et al., 2009; Karlsen, 2000). This contestation is in turn linked with an “accountability movement” in places like Canada, the United States, and Brazil (Mazurek, Winzer, & Majorek, 2000).
However, as political and ideological contestations for control over schooling, curriculum, and knowledge, education policies are re-conceptualized and enacted in distinct ways in diverse national and sub-national contexts (Astiz et al., 2002; Ball, 1998; Beech, 2009; Karlsen, 2000; Zadja, 2004). Not surprisingly, contextually unique forms of decentralization/centralization have emerged in the Americas and other regions (Adrião, 2008; Astiz et al., 2002; Beech, 2009; Bjork, 2003; Derqui, 2001; Gandin, 2007; Gvirtz, 2002; Karlsen, 2000; Osei, 2010; Prawda, 1993; Rivarola & Fuller, 1999; Tato, 1999). Since the 1990s in Brazil for example, a combination of national education plans, curriculum standards, and standardized evaluations together with a decentralization of financial, administrative, and curricular responsibility to municipalities and schools has taken place (Beech, 2009; Derqui, 2001; Gvirtz, 2002).

As with education policy, critical educators regard curricula as dynamic arenas of contestation over whose and what knowledge is most legitimate in schools and society (Apple, 1995, 2004; Cornbleth, 2000; Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003; Giroux, 1988; Lopes & Macedo, 2003; McLaren, 1998; McNeil, 1988; Sleeter & Stillman, 2005). Cornbleth (2000) reminds us:

Curriculum policy making, including syllabus revision or creating a framework and standards, is always a matter of knowledge control—of trying to control the knowledge to be made available to students in classrooms across the district, state, or nation.

Controlling curriculum knowledge means selecting some knowledge to be included and other knowledge to be kept out. (p. 221)

The official curriculum, that prescribed content made official in national, state, and/or local documents and materials (Portelli, 1993), exemplifies this. This formal curriculum exhibits not
only legitimate knowledge and how it is conceptualized, but also how it is meant to be transmitted and analyzed in classrooms.

Bernstein’s (1971) concepts of classification and framing help deconstruct this knowledge–pedagogy conceptualization in the official curriculum. Classification refers to the organization and treatment of knowledge in the official curriculum (Bernstein, 1971). More specifically, classification is concerned with the relationships between different knowledge in the curriculum: between academic knowledge or content areas, and between curriculum and community knowledge (Bernstein, 1971; Scott, 2008). These relationships reveal not only degrees of insulation between such knowledge, but also status differences among them. Framing alludes to the degree of authority teachers and students have in the transmission of knowledge in classrooms (Bernstein, 1971). It indicates the extent to which knowledge in the official curriculum is predetermined or standardized (Scott, 2008). Framing also reflects how prescriptively mapped out intended pedagogical practices are (Scott, 2008; Sleeter & Stillman, 2005).

Nonetheless, the official curriculum is always being remade, contested, and even ignored in classrooms (Apple, 2006; Cornbleth, 2000; Santos, 2002). Gaps are wedged between the official curriculum and what occurs in the enacted curriculum in classrooms (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Giroux, 1988; Marsh & Willis, 2003; Santos, 2002; Tabulawa, 2004). After all, curriculum is a “dynamic relationship among teachers, students, knowledge, and contexts” (Portelli & Vibert, 2002, p. 36). Likewise, the enacted curriculum is a “dynamic system” of co-constructed practice among teachers and students (Tabulawa, 2004).
Critical theorists’ conceptualizations of the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy web offer a uniquely suited theoretical foundation for examining curriculum knowledge across the official and enacted curriculum divide in Brazil. Their perspectives parallel a tradition of critical educational thought in Brazil over the past several decades, including the influence of critical theories on the curriculum field there and some of the official discourse today (Gandin, 2007; Lopes, Macedo, & Paiva, 2006). As well, critical educators’ recognition of the multilevel linkage between global forces, education policy, curriculum, and contexts offers helpful angles for scrutinizing the advocated re-articulation of curricula across national, municipal, and school levels in Brazil.

1.3 Research Contexts & Rationale

I selected Salvador, Bahia and Teresina, Piauí in Brazil’s Northeast as the contexts of my research. My interest in Brazil was based on my experiences teaching, traveling, and attending academic meetings, classes, and conferences there over the past 15 years. I chose the Northeast given its historical significance for Brazil and the contrast between simultaneously being at the center and periphery of national influence and understanding. Although considered the birthplace of Brazil and by some as the soul of the nation, the Northeast has been “one of the most discussed, but least known geographic regions of Brazil” (Andrade, 1980, p. 6). It has also, until recently, remained on the fringes of national political attention and economic development. Additionally, the region is home to the country’s most pronounced social inequalities and urgent societal issues. I assumed these characteristics together with the urban periphery contexts of my research sites might distinguish public school curricula there from elsewhere in Brazil.
My rationale for choosing two contrasting state capitals in the Northeast originated from my desire to understand how official curricula differ as well as how such are enacted in two contexts within this region. I anticipated similarities yet also contextually distinct curricula in the coastal city of Salvador as compared with the inland city of Teresina. My interest in Teresina was also piqued by citizenship projects and peace marches, together with the fact that the city’s municipal public elementary school system has been ranked as the best in the Northeast region.

A sub-national case study comparison was chosen to understand how municipal curricula knowledge dynamics are forged within this region as well as due to the dearth of sub-national studies in comparative educational research (Bray & Thomas, 1995; Broadfoot, 2000; Fry & Kempner, 1996). This approach was deemed integral to comprehending schooling in Brazil given the (purported) significant degree of curriculum decentralization (Bray & Thomas, 1995). In doing so, my research exposed similarities and differences across two sites, a point that supports Kubow and Fossum’s (2003) rationale for comparative research and Apple’s (2003) call for greater awareness of how curriculum knowledge is shaped in diverse historical contexts.

On top of being a sub-national comparison, my research entailed a multilevel analysis spanning policy, the official curriculum, and the enacted curriculum in order to make sense of school realities and practices (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1984). Such multilevel approaches yield a more “balanced understanding” of the complexities of education systems (Bray & Thomas, 1995, p. 488). They also help to comprehend the global–local interplay of transnational forces and local education practices (Arnowe, 2003; Crossley, 2000; Hayhoe & Mundy, 2008; Marginson & Mollis, 2002; Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006). This is important considering there is insufficient understanding of how decentralization and centralization policies are implemented in practice.
(Astiz et al., 2002; Bjork, 2003; Derqui, 2001).

My study also built on critical theory’s macro and micro-level analyses, from structural forces to classroom interactions (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990; Sprague, 1992), in extending the foci of comparative curriculum studies from the official to the enacted curriculum. This is notable given the lack of comparative research on how official curricula are implemented in schools and enacted in classrooms (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Benavot & Resh, 2001). A connected springboard for inquiry is the gap in research on knowledge in the enacted curriculum. Gandin asserts, “The lack of discussion about what should be valued as knowledge is one of the central issues needing to be addressed in education today” (2007, p. 179).

This investigation of knowledge across the official and enacted curriculum is of particular relevance to Brazil. In Brazil national and municipal curriculum guidelines are to be tailored to local contextual realities and re-articulated at the school level (Brasil, 1997a; SEMEC, 2008; SMEC, 2006). In spite of such official discourse, however, it has been reported that local realities are incompatible with public schooling (Almeida, 2003). Furthermore, dissertations on public school curricula in Brazil have focused on evaluating rather than understanding practices (Lopes et al., 2006).

Classroom-based research using an ethnographic approach was therefore considered essential for ascertaining more about how and why certain curriculum knowledge dynamics are formed in each context (Apple, 2004). In addition to understanding classroom practices within particular contexts, classroom-based research was seen as pivotal for uncovering how teachers view and justify pedagogical practices in their classrooms, as well as how such practices relate to their conceptualizations of knowledge and curriculum. It was also deemed necessary for gaining
insight into what happens in classrooms and why, and the relation of such dynamics to the official curriculum, education policy, and contextual factors.

1.4 Empirical Study

While not striving to prove or uphold critical educators’ perspectives, my study used their conceptualizations of knowledge and knowledge in the official and enacted curriculum as a theoretical framework for exploring the following question: What are the knowledge dynamics spanning the official and enacted curriculum in two municipal public elementary schools in Salvador, Bahia and Teresina, Piauí? Four sub-questions guided my investigation:

1. How is knowledge classified and framed in the official national and municipal curriculum?
2. What knowledge is engaged with in the enacted curriculum?
3. How is such knowledge engaged with and why?
4. What are pedagogic staff’s perspectives on curriculum knowledge and pedagogy?

To investigate these questions, I used a comparative ethnographic case study of two schools, one in Salvador, Bahia and the other in Teresina, Piauí between February and December 2008. My study was situated in the notion of ethnography as an attempt to understand social actions within a particular context, as well as the meanings such actions have for participants (Pole & Morrison, 2003). Such understanding necessitates the researcher’s ongoing participation in the context being studied (Pole & Morrison, 2003). I therefore immersed myself in the social life of classrooms, documented what I observed, and analyzed patterns that emerged from the collected data (Esterberg, 2002; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995).

My primary research focus was on understanding classroom knowledge dynamics, yet doing so required examination of the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy nexus across the
official–enacted curriculum span. Consequently, I utilized document analyses, observations, and interviews to address my research questions. Analysis of the classification and framing of knowledge in national and municipal curriculum guidelines based on Bernstein’s concepts helped me understand the conceptualization of knowledge–pedagogy relations in the official curriculum in both contexts. This also allowed me to juxtapose such with classroom knowledge dynamics. Classroom observations of one fifth-year teacher’s, the focus teacher, classes in each school over five months permitted me to experience, investigate, and document classroom practices in order to understand how certain knowledge was engaged with in the enacted curriculum (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2002). In addition, staff meetings served as informative landscapes between the official and enacted curriculum for noting pedagogic staff’s conceptualizations of curriculum, knowledge, and pedagogy.

Lastly, semi-structured individual interviews with the focus teachers, principals, and one pedagogic coordinator along with a semi-structured group interview with the fourth and fifth-year morning session teachers elucidated how different participants made sense of the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy relationship in each context. These participants’ perspectives provided reasons why curriculum knowledge was engaged with in certain ways in classrooms. They also were instrumental in illuminating contradictions between education policies and the official and enacted curriculum.

1.5 Thesis Preview

My research used a critical theoretical framework to analyze the classification and framing of knowledge in the official national and municipal curriculum, investigate pedagogic staff’s perspectives, and examine what knowledge was engaged with, and how and why in the
enacted curriculum of two municipal elementary schools in Salvador and Teresina. In doing so it addressed perceived gaps in research on curriculum. The following chapter serves as a theoretical foundation for this thesis. It provides an extensive review of scholarly literature on the neoliberal influence on educational decentralization/centralization policies, as well as critical educational theorists’ conceptualizations of knowledge and knowledge in the official and enacted curriculum. Chapter 3 details my research methodology. Chapter 4 situates my research in the context of the urban periphery in Northeast Brazil. Chapter 5 offers an overview of public primary schooling and education policy in Brazil. Chapter 6 presents my analysis of the official national and municipal curriculum. Chapters 7 and 8 describe two overlapping themes that emerged from interviews with pedagogic staff and my observations in the enacted curriculum, including how such relate to the literature. Chapter 9 concludes with a summary of the central thesis of my research, a discussion of affiliated problematic issues and their significance in light of my research contexts, an outline of my study’s contributions to comparative education literature on curriculum and education policy, and mention of research implications for further scholarly inquiry into public schooling in Brazil and elsewhere.
Chapter 2 – Literature Review

“It is now increasingly difficult to understand education in any context without reference to the global forces that influence policy and practice” (Crossley, 2000, p. 324). This is because “national, international and global elements are intermeshed” in the “dynamics” of each education system (Marginson & Mollis, 2002, p. 587). With this understanding, this chapter first outlines transnational neoliberal influences and related educational decentralization and centralization policies in the Americas in recent decades. As such influences and policies speak to control over schooling, curriculum, and curriculum knowledge, this literature review also addresses the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy nexus. It does so through a description of my theoretical framework: critical educators’ conceptualizations of knowledge, and knowledge in the official and enacted curriculum.

2.1 Neoliberalism & Educational Decentralization/Centralization in the Americas

Conceptualizing Neoliberalism

Conceptualizations of neoliberalism in academic discourse are anything but monolithic. Neoliberalism is a widely used term conveying varied meanings in academia (Narodowski & Nores, 2003). Its proponents even reject its usage in favor of lexica such as privatization, decentralization, and deregulation (Henales & Edwards, 2002). Arno (1997) provides a lucid summary of the etymology and multifaceted aspects of neoliberalism:

The term neoliberal derives from the neoclassical economic theories expounded by major international donor agencies like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and their consultants. The theories are based on work of classical economists Adam Smith and David Ricardo, who believed that the role of the state consisted in
establishing the conditions by which the free play of the marketplace, the laws of supply and demand, and free trade based on competitive advantage would inevitably rebound to the benefit of all. Government policies, based on these notions, have led to a drastic reduction in the state’s role in social spending, deregulation of the economy, and liberalization of import policies. (p. 79)

While there is no single agreed upon definition of neoliberalism, it can be understood as an economic rather than a political conception of democracy (Apple, 2006). Neoliberal ideology regards the market as the most important element to protect in that society should function according to the principles of the economy (Apple, 2006; Klees, 2008; Stromquist, 2003; Torres, 2002). To paraphrase Giroux (2004, p. 32), the “market economy” is seen as a “market society” through a neoliberal lens. Neoliberals “believe in a strict interpretation of the neoclassical bible of perfect competition. They generally believe that free markets do work in the social interest and the government does not” (Klees, 2008, p. 317). Neoliberalism also defines “profit making and market freedoms as the essence of democracy” (Giroux, 2004, p. 31). Amidst this “profit over people” orientation, economic growth becomes the focal point while humanitarian democratic concerns such as inequality are cast aside (Chomsky, 1999; Giroux, 2004). Indeed some tenets of neoliberalism are in opposition to ideals of liberalism such as human rights (J. Portelli, personal communication, July 20, 2010).

Neoliberalism has not been confined to economic spheres or political borders. The market foci of neoliberalism have become a “common sense” recipe for informing public policies in global contexts (Apple, 2006). Accordingly, neoliberalism has shaped the restructuring of the relationship among states, institutions, and societies. In Latin America for instance, the principal
shift has been toward a “market-friendly state” through structural adjustment, funding “conditionalities” dictated by agencies and institutions, and privatization, deregulation, and decentralization measures aimed at combating bureaucratic inefficiency, corruption, and socioeconomic inequality (Arnove, 1997; Fischman et al., 2003; Schugurensky, 2003, p. 61). Nations like Argentina and Brazil have “embarked on neoliberal restructuring of the state and integration to the world economy under the guidance of international financial organizations like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank” (Derqui, 2001, p. 575). Such trends have been re-stitched in national and sub-national economic, political, and educational spheres there and elsewhere (Gandin, 2007; Torres, 2002).

Neoliberalism & Education

Neoliberalism has impacted education policy and practice throughout the Americas and beyond in recent decades (Apple, 2006; Arnove, 1997, 2003; Basu, 2004; Canen & Grant, 1999; Derqui, 2001; Fischman et al., 2003; Gadotti, 1997; Gandin, 2007; Giroux, 2004; Henales & Edwards, 2002; Hypolito et al., 2009; Kempner & Jurema, 2002; Klees, 2008; Leistyna, 2007; Lopes & Macedo, 2003; Marcondes, 1999; Narodowski & Nores, 2003; Puiggrós, 1999; Rivarola & Fuller, 1999; Schugurensky, 2003; Stromquist, 2003; Torres, 2002). This influence stems largely from 1980s reforms in the United States and Britain and international organizations like the IMF and the World Bank (Arnove, 1997, 2003; Beech, 2009; Fischman et al., 2003; Kempner & Jurema, 2002; Rivarola & Fuller, 1999). Rivarola and Fuller (1999) elaborate:

The political push to decentralize school management has seeped outward from the West over the past decade, spreading across continents into many policy circles. Domestic leaders and international agencies have come to believe that expanding school choice and
making schools autonomous from public bureaucracy will lead to all sorts of positive outcomes. This faith has grown stronger as policy leaders and local activists have come to disdain what they see as cumbersome bureaucracy and increasingly doubt the effectiveness of central government. Many now embrace the market metaphor, urging that public institutions be held more directly accountable to their clients. (p. 489)

Hence, the “closely intertwined economic and education agendas” of neoliberalism are linked with the prescriptions of international institutions and agencies (Arnove, 2003, p. 2).

Under neoliberal thought education is regarded as a “marketable commodity” designed to “produce better human resources who are able to improve the economic competitiveness of their countries in international markets” (Derqui, 2001, p. 576; Schugurensky, 2003). Schools are therefore envisioned less as institutions for promoting political democracy as they are for their alignment with economic market demands and interests (Apple, 2003, 2006; Broadfoot, 2000; Canen & Grant, 1999; Fischman et al., 2003; Giroux, 1988; Stromquist, 2003). “The school becomes an institution that must serve the economy; this means generating knowledge to serve economic production and training students primarily in response to labor needs” (Stromquist, 2003, pp. 200-201). In turn, school curriculum knowledge is conceptualized as a predetermined commodity to be acquired by future workers to meet market standards and stimulate economic productivity (Apple, 2003, 2006; Canen & Grant, 1999; Giroux, 1988; Marcondes, 1999).

As a consequence, there has been an increasing obsession with interconnected international rankings and standardized testing (Broadfoot, 2000). Broadfoot (2000) summarizes: In today’s increasingly globalised, fluid and fragmented world, the pressure for education to provide the international currency which will form the basis for trade in the knowledge
society becomes daily more explicit. As a result, those aspects of educational activity that
do not lend themselves to explicit and quantifiable measurement, are increasingly
difficult to sustain. Both individuals and institutions, and even whole systems of
educational provision, are necessarily becoming increasingly focused on achieving those
measures which are the key to survival in the international educational competition. (p. 359)

Arnove (2003) similarly states:

The belief that there is a causal relationship between the ‘excellence’ of a school
system, as measured by national standardized examinations, and the economic success
of a country in global competition has revived the interest in the relationship between
education systems and national productivity. (p. 4)

The discourse surrounding neoliberalism is far from uniform, though. Some speak of
neoliberalism and neoconservatism as complementary ideologies that have altered schooling.
These educators label standards, national curricula, and evaluations as neoconservative or
conservative initiatives (Apple, 2003, 2004, 2006; Arnove, 1997; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993;
Giroux, 1988). Others refer to such tendencies as neoliberal centralization and/or
decentralization (Derqui, 2001; Gvirtz, 2002; Hypolito et al., 2009; McGinn & Street, 1986;
Schugurensky, 2003; Zadja, 2004). To parallel much of the discourse in scholarly literature on
education policy in Latin America and Brazil in Chapter 5, I use the terms decentralization and
centralization in reference to education policies associated with neoliberalism.
Neoliberalism & Educational Decentralization/Centralization

Neoliberalism has sparked a worldwide trend of educational decentralization/centralization in recent decades. Numerous authors have documented this phenomenon in the Americas and other regions (Astiz et al., 2002; Bjork, 2003; Bray, 2003; Derqui, 2001; Gvirtz, 2002; Gvirtz & Beech; 2004; Hypolito et al., 2009; Karlsen, 2000; McGinn & Street, 1986; Meade & Gershberg, 2008; Narodowski & Nares, 2003; Osei, 2010; Prawda, 1993; Rivarola & Fuller, 1999; Schiefelbein, 2004; Schugurensky, 2003; Tato, 1999; Whitty et al., 1998).

Decentralization/centralization is “inherently a political process concerned with specifying who rules in particular settings” (Samoff, 2003b, p. 426). It entails a two-way distribution of authority among tiers of government, and between government and citizens (Karlsen, 2000; Lauglo, 1995; McGinn & Street, 1986). More specifically, it involves shifting degrees of authority, autonomy, and accountability for educational financing, governance, and quality of provision from the central state to provinces or states, municipalities, and schools (Derqui, 2001; Zadja; 2004). Moves toward greater decentralization may include a delegation of functions and responsibilities to sub-national levels, which may or may not result in increased local authority and autonomy (Bray, 2003; Karlsen, 2000; Lauglo, 1995). Alternatively, in the case of devolution local levels (allegedly) gain authority and autonomy in certain respects such as curriculum in relation to a central body (Bray, 2003; Karlsen, 2000).

Decentralization/centralization is “linked to the neoliberal restructuring of the state, to pressures from globalization processes and forces, and to various internal demands for improving quality and efficiency in the delivery of education” (Derqui, 2001, p. 561). Not surprisingly, overlapping economic, efficiency, political, and educational quality rationale encompass
endorsements of educational decentralization. Economic motives are backed for reducing expenses of school provision by shifting cost burdens to and allowing for financial autonomy at local levels (Prawda, 1993). Efficiency grounds are promulgated given the belief that decentralization can spur more adequate allocation and utilization of resources to meet local needs (Arnove, 1997; Gomes, Capanema, & Câmara, 2000; Prawda, 1993; Schiefelbein, 2004). In this sense, one of the state’s functions is to foster “more involvement of local communities in funding and/or administration” (Derqui, 2001, p. 575; Fischman et al., 2003). Efficiency is also concerned with per-student expenditures (Samoff, 2003a). Since the less a school spends per student the more efficient it is, efficiency can be improved by reducing dropout and retention rates (Samoff, 2003a).

Political arguments emphasize democratization by expanding decision-making among increased numbers of stakeholders, as well as better addressing local realities (Azevedo, 2002; Lauglo, 1995; Prawda, 1993; Schiefelbein, 2004). In this way, schools are to be “empowered” as they become responsible for “implementing their pedagogic proposals and managing their personnel, materials, and financial resources” (Gomes et al., 2000, p. 38). Greater authority among schools, teachers, parents, and communities is in turn deemed pivotal for improving school quality (Arnove, 1997; Azevedo, 2002; Derqui, 2001; Gomes et al., 2000; Sarmento, 2005; Schiefelbein, 2004). It “is seen to increase responsiveness to local conditions and students’ particular characteristics, teacher professionalization, and the production of relevant curriculum” (Derqui, 2001, p. 576).

Decentralized autonomy and authority cannot be dissociated from centralization, however. Educational decentralization/centralization is a “double and concurrent
dynamic” (Schugurensky, 2003, p. 58). Decentralization is hinged to national goals, evaluations, and standards (Derqui, 2001; Prawda, 1993; Sarmento, 2005).

The concurrent characteristic of decentralization/centralization facilitates understanding of how devolution can be misleading. Portelli refers to devolution as “one of the illusions created by neoliberalism” (personal communication, July 20, 2010). It can in fact be a strategy for increasing centralization of authority and control (J. Portelli, personal communication, July 20, 2010; Tatto, 1999; Whitty et al., 1998). Tatto (1999) writes about the “paradoxes” of educational decentralization in Mexico. This has involved devolution of authority over curriculum to state and local levels, yet the federal government has instituted accountability mechanisms such as textbooks and evaluations. “Decentralization has become a tool of the federal government to reaffirm and maintain control” (p. 280). Whitty et al. (1998) elaborate on corresponding paradoxical aspects of decentralization in Australia, England, Wales, Sweden, and the United States. They find that “devolution of responsibilities to individual schools was accompanied by increased powers of surveillance on the part of central and state governments” (p. v). This includes “centrally defined goals concerning what schools should teach, and how their performance should be assessed” (p. 30). I revisit these points at the end of this section after providing supporting examples from Canada, the United States, and Brazil.

Decentralization/centralization is largely about control over curriculum. Astiz et al. (2002) write that the aims of education reforms in numerous countries are “control over the content of school curricula and methods of curricular implementation within classrooms” (p. 71). Karlsen (2000) offers a related take:

Decentralization in education has been closely connected to the balance between
standardization and diversity of school content and curriculum. More specifically, the centralization–decentralization dimension has led to questions such as: What should be taught in school? To what degree should the curriculum be standardized? Should the curriculum be set at local or national/provincial level? (p. 531)

Such curriculum contestation involves what Schugurensky (2003, p. 58) describes as “relaxing process control but strengthening product control.” For him this means “delegating the control over institutional processes to local agents while tightening the control of the general direction and expected outcomes of educational policies” (p. 58). The strengthening of product control is exemplified by curriculum standards, standardized tests, and ranking systems (Broadfoot, 2000). These “regulatory” measures are tied to neoliberal rationale for enhancing national economic competitiveness in global markets (Apple, 2006, p. 71; Basu, 2004; Mazurek et al., 2000). They are also crucial to the “marketization” of schooling in that they “provide the mechanisms for comparative data that ‘consumers’ need to make markets work as markets” (Apple, 2006, p. 71). Further, they are allied with competition across schools, districts, states, provinces or territories, and nations (Apple, 2004, 2006; Valente & Arelaro, 2002). These elements of product control imply that youth “compete with each other in the business of regurgitating their knowledge in specific ways” (Broadfoot, 2000, p. 363).

Educational decentralization/centralization is also lodged in state policies. Education policies are connected with the “changing state, the changing economy, and the changing needs of diverse populations” (Fischman et al., 2003, p. 13). Yet education policies do not only include what is laid out in official texts. They extend from federal agendas and government documents to the realm of school practices and my research focus on curriculum knowledge. They are “textual
interventions into practice” (Ball, 1994, p. 18). They endorse “practices that legitimate and privilege some forms of knowledge over others or some groups over others” (Giroux, 1988, p. 103). They might also take the form of practice in schools (Samoff, 2003b). This policy in practice may vary substantially from the official pronounced vision (Samoff, 2003b).

Education policies are re-contextualized in distinct ways in different contexts. They “rarely if ever translate into policy texts or practice in direct or pristine form” (Ball, 1998, p. 126). Such re-contextualization is tied to the ideological and political roots of education policies. “Policies are both systems of values and symbolic systems; ways of representing, accounting for and legitimating political decisions. Policies are articulated both to achieve material effects and to manufacture support for those effects” (Ball, 1998, p. 124). Yet these roots are not unvarying. Rather, policies are contested texts that reflect compromises among “multiple influences and agendas” (Ball, 1994, p. 16). Decentralization/centralization policies in the Americas and elsewhere are indicative of this contestation and re-contextualization (Adrião, 2008; Astiz et al., 2002; Beech, 2009; Bjork, 2003; Derqui, 2001; Gandin, 2007; Gvirtz, 2002; Karlsen, 2000; Osei, 2010; Prawda, 1993; Rivarola & Fuller, 1999; Tatto, 1999). The following examples from Canada, the United States, and Brazil illustrate this.

Increased centralized regulation of curriculum standards and testing reflects neoliberal impacts on education reform in provinces like Ontario in Canada over the past 15 years (Basu, 2004). Basu points out that this reform was justified by the perceived need to “remain globally competitive in a knowledge based market economy” by raising standards, improving outcomes, and ensuring accountability (p. 623). As part of this, whereas school boards and schools once could develop locally relevant curricula, control over curriculum has shifted to the provincial
level in places such as Ontario (Winter & McEachern, 2001). Province-wide curriculum
standards set by the Ontario Ministry of Education for instance are linked with standardized tests
set by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) (Basu, 2004). Results on EQAO
tests are used to rank schools and school boards within Ontario as well as are compared across
Canadian provinces and territories. Moreover, the EQAO oversees Ontario’s participation in and
publishes the province’s results on international standardized tests such as the Trends in
International Mathematics and Science Study. As EQAO’s (2008) “Ontario Results Report” says,
this data permits comparisons of Ontario students’ achievement against international
benchmarks.

Like Canada, the United States has historically had a highly decentralized education
system in which local levels have held greater control over curriculum (Rivarola & Fuller, 1999;
Tatto, 1999). In recent years, however, the federal government has become increasingly involved
in setting national standards and evaluations tied to state testing and curricula (Hursh & Martina,
2003). The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) national law of 2001 and state legislation such as the
Public School Accountability Act of 1999 of California are symbolic of this dynamic.

Legitimized by discourse of improving education efficiency and quality, NCLB has
resulted in centralized standardized testing, curriculum standards, and an accountability system
for all schools and states (Hursh & Martina, 2003). Hursh and Martina (2003) note:

With NCLB the federal government has determined which subject areas take precedence,
limits the ways in which they may be taught, and designates what reform options are
available to schools and districts that fail to improve sufficiently their test scores. (para. 3)
Under the national blanket of accountability spread by NCLB, the Public School Accountability Act of California created an achievement test system to match the state’s curriculum content standards (Sleeter & Stillman, 2005). The latter define the knowledge and skills that students should acquire for each grade level and subject of public schooling (Sleeter & Stillman, 2005). This predetermined curriculum and predefined knowledge is tied to subject area frameworks that prescribe the sequence of what should be taught as well as mandate how teachers should teach (Sleeter & Stillman, 2005). Sleeter and Stillman conclude that teachers and schools are thus pressured to focus on standardized test scores “rather than asking whose knowledge, language, and points of view are most worth teaching children” (2005, p. 44).

Brazil has been marked by a more centralized education system than the United States or Canada, yet various facets of its public schooling have undergone decentralization over the last two decades. Since the 1990s in Brazil and Latin America there has been a predominant trend of national education plans, evaluations, rankings, and curriculum standards together with a decentralization of financial, administrative, and curricular responsibility to municipalities and, most recently, to schools (Beech, 2009; Derqui, 2001; Gvirtz, 2002). Gvirtz (2002) elaborates with respect to curriculum:

A new model of curricular management has begun to take shape in the majority of the countries of the region. In this, the organs of the central government are responsible for the development of the general frame of basic contents and/or goals. Each jurisdiction remains in charge of defining plans and programmes. Each school does its specifications, generally through a curricular project which, within more general principles, puts into
practice sets of objectives, contents and educational activities better suited to respond to the needs and expectations of each school’s community. (p. 460)

Such a decentralization/centralization pattern has occurred in Brazil. While basic education policy in Brazil is not entirely neoliberal owing largely to a tradition of critical educational thought such as critical pedagogy, teacher unions, and the historical exclusion of many from public schooling (Gandin, 2007), it has clearly been steered by global neoliberal currents (Canen & Grant, 1999; Derqui, 2001; Gandin, 2007; Hypolito et al., 2009; Kempner & Jurema, 2002; Lopes & Macedo, 2003; Wong & Balestino, 2003). Lopes and Macedo (2003) call attention to the neoliberal tides pushing decentralization/centralization reforms there:

The educational scene in Brazil in the 1990s, especially the curriculum field, deeply reflected an option toward alignment with neo-liberal policies. The insertion of the country in a globalized economy now required a new set of schooling standards. . . . In its effort to streamline public expenditure on social sectors, including education, the government has been proposing exams and curricula on a national basis to funnel investments and guaranteeing control over academic work so as to forge a mentality more in accordance with the objectives of these policies. (p. 187)

Though Chapter 5 profiles Brazilian public school education policy in detail, it is helpful to preview the main layers of recent decentralization and centralization amidst neoliberal influence in Brazil. Since the mid-1990s, improvements in basic education in Brazil have been emphasized to enhance Brazil’s global economic competitiveness (Borges, 2008; Canen & Grant, 1999; Derqui, 2001; Hypolito et al., 2009; Lopes & Macedo, 2003; Marcondes, 1999; Moraes, 2003; Wong & Balestino, 2003). To this end Brazil first devised a 10-year plan “with the goals of
establishing minimum curricular contents and standards for educational management” (Derqui, 2001, p. 571). This was followed by the 1996 Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional (LDB, or Law of Guidelines and Foundations for National Education). The LDB advocated the decentralization of curriculum, governance, and financial responsibility to states, municipalities, and public primary and secondary schools, yet also created a more active role for the federal government with national achievement tests (Derqui, 2001; Marcondes, 1999; Wong & Balestino, 2003).

The intertwined national evaluation and ranking systems together with affiliated national curriculum standards are evidence of the attempted centralized control over curriculum. The centerpiece of education reform, the 1996 Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais (PCNs, or National Curriculum Parameters) were designed to improve educational quality by raising curriculum standards. They were also created to implement the national evaluation and ranking system (Arelaro, 2005; Gandin, 2007; Hypolito et al., 2009; Marcondes, 1999; Valente & Arelaro, 2002). This linkage with evaluations and rankings is a key point. Though the PCNs are meant to serve as guidelines leading to the creation of contextually relevant municipal and school curricula, they outline “in general lines, ‘what,’ ‘why,’ ‘when,’ and ‘how’ to teach and evaluate” (Gomes et al., 2000, p. 42). So, in spite of the fact municipalities and schools are granted greater administrative and curricular autonomy, they are also held accountable for implementing policies and following guidelines conceived at the national level (Azevedo, 2002). For these reasons, some regard the centralized curriculum parameters, evaluations, and rankings as neoliberal elements of control (Canen & Grant, 1999; Gandin, 2007; Hypolito et al., 2009).
The public education systems of Canada, the United States, and Brazil reflect an “accountability movement” in the Americas, one that has been “wrapped in the disguise of decentralizing and democratizing education” (Gomes et al., 2000; Mazurek et al., 2000, p. 14). This accountability epitomizes what Kickert (as cited in Ball, 1994) termed “steering at a distance.” That is to say, the state decentralizes financial, administrative, and curricular responsibility yet holds provinces or states, municipalities, and schools accountable for achieving centrally defined quality performance benchmarks (Hursh & Martina, 2003; Valente & Arelaro, 2002). Mazurek et al. (2000) call this a “red herring.” They explain:

To preserve the illusion of not eroding democratic rights at the local level, governments are granting regional authorities more power over their day-to-day affairs. However, because the criteria upon which educational institutions are increasingly being held accountable are not set by local institutions or educators, real autonomy is severely curtailed. Local and regional educators and administrators implement education policies, deliver curricula, and evaluate students and teachers, but they may do so only within parameters and criteria that are determined by higher authorities. (p. 14)

Neoliberalism has therefore orchestrated an ensemble of educational decentralization and centralization policies that exerts substantial control over curriculum and curriculum knowledge (Hypolito et al., 2009; Zadja, 2004). While local realities and students and teachers ultimately determine classroom practices, the decentralization/centralization dynamic and education policies intervene in shaping how curricula are enacted (Astiz et al., 2002; Ball, 1994).
2.2 Critical Educators’ Conceptualizations of Knowledge

Critical theory represents a multiplicity of cross-disciplinary standpoints and theories influenced by traditions emerging from diverse historical contexts (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990; Darder et al., 2003; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; Klees, 2008; McLaren, 1998). Among the theoretical perspectives comprising critical theory are neo-Marxist, resistance, feminist, critical race, critical postmodern, post-structural, and critical pedagogy (Klees, 2008). Critical theories such as critical pedagogy have been criticized for not discussing gender, race, ethnicity and class, portraying Eurocentric and male-authored views, using inaccessible language, and conveying excessively utopian notions of empowerment (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990; Darder et al., 2003; Ellsworth, 1989; Swartz, 1996). As well, critical educational theorists may not speak to other complexities of teaching. Niyozov’s research (2008) for example highlights that teaching involves wide-ranging classroom practices, embodies numerous goals and objectives, and is molded by changing notions of relationships, caring, commitment, and moral responsibility.

Yet critical educators’ perspectives on knowledge and the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy web are useful for my research on municipal school curricula in Northeast Brazil. For one, the Northeast is the birthplace of critical pedagogy and its progenitor, Paulo Freire. Second, since the 1980s the curriculum field in Brazil has been significantly influenced by critical theories and educators like Apple and Giroux (Lopes et al., 2006). Third, critical educators are interested in examining the legitimacy of knowledge in schooling, including “how and why knowledge gets constructed the way it does” (McLaren, 1998, p. 174). On this note, Sleeter and Stillman’s (2005) insight into the worldwide trend of curriculum standardization offers a gateway for inquiry. For them such standardization:
Is not simply about trying to improve student learning, but more important, about reasserting who has a right to define what schools are for, whose knowledge has most legitimacy, and how the next generation should think about the social order and their place within it. (Sleeter & Stillman, 2005, p. 27)

Therefore, while I do not champion critical educators’ perspectives as panaceas, I draw on them as a theoretical framework through which to understand curriculum knowledge dynamics in Brazil’s municipal elementary schools. The foundation for doing so is understanding how critical educators make sense of knowledge.

Four interrelated sub-themes constitute critical educational theorists’ conceptualizations of knowledge: (a) the historicity of knowledge, (b) knowledge as ideological, (c) knowledge and power, and (d) knowledge as contested. These support the contention that all knowledge is partial and never neutral (Giroux, 1988; Klees, 2008; McLaren, 1998; Sprague, 1992).

**Historicity of Knowledge**

Freire’s (1998) notion of the *historicity of knowledge* is fundamental to these overlapping conceptions. It refers to the understanding that knowledge is a social construction of reality that it is situated, constructed, and produced within certain social and historical contexts and conditions (Banks, 1993; Darder et al., 2003; Freire, 1998; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 1998). Banks (1993) underscores the idea of historicity in his definition of knowledge. He defines knowledge as “the way a person explains or interprets reality” (p. 5). Banks adds, “The knowledge that people create is heavily influenced by their interpretations of their experiences and their positions within particular social, economic, and political systems and structures of a society” (p. 5).
As part of the notion of historicity, critical educators regard knowledge as dynamic rather than static or complete. Knowledge is continually created and re-created (Freire, 2000; Freire & Macedo, 1995). Knowledge “emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry [people] pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (Freire, 2000, p. 58). For Freire (2000), knowledge is not just the construction but also the reconstruction of our world. This ongoing construction and reconstruction of knowledge and the world is situated within and oriented to particular contexts and conditions.

**Knowledge as Ideological**

Critical educators also understand knowledge as ideological. For McLaren, ideology is “a way of viewing the world, a complex of ideas, various types of social practices, rituals and representations that we tend to accept as natural and as common sense” (1998, p. 180). Darder et al. (2003) complement McLaren’s view in stating that ideology is a “framework of thought that is used in society to give order and meaning to the social and political world in which we live” (p. 13). Their conceptions facilitate awareness of how ideology impacts knowledge, that is how people make sense of reality.

Ideology underpins what gets determined as official or legitimate knowledge in society and schooling (Apple, 2003; McLaren, 1998). Apple (2003) summarizes how the U.S. government produced “official knowledge” of employment rates in the 1980s and 1990s. By omitting the imprisoned population from the statistics, unemployment rates were repeatedly lower than those in Western Europe, a tactic used to argue in favor of the minimalist role of the state in welfare matters. This example speaks to the recognition that knowledge is legitimized through and legitimizes certain interests and interpretations. Stanfield (1985) explains:
Knowledge becomes the official way of interpreting realities through the ability of a privileged subset of the population to exert its will on others through its control of such major institutions and resources as the media, legislation, and compulsory schooling. (p. 389)

Such legitimization and attempts to control are apparent in the ideological realm of curriculum knowledge. Apple (2004) writes extensively about this:

The study of educational knowledge is a study in ideology, the investigation of what is considered legitimate knowledge by specific social groups and classes, in specific institutions, at specific historical moments. . . . The overt and covert knowledge found within school settings, and the principles of selection, organization, and evaluation of this knowledge, are value-governed selections from a much larger universe of possible knowledge and selection principles. Hence they must not be accepted as given, but must be made problematic so that the social and economic ideologies and institutionally patterned meanings which stand behind them, can be scrutinized. (p. 43)

Knowledge & Power

A related perspective among critical educators is that knowledge is a social construction of reality rooted in power relations. Sleeter and Grant (1991) hold that individuals exercise power when they act to create a desired “state of affairs” (p. 50). They clarify:

Knowledge is central to power. Knowledge helps us envision the contours and limits of our own existence, what is desirable and possible, and what actions might bring about those possibilities. . . . Knowledge that empowers centers around the interests and aims of the prospective knower. Apart from the knower, knowledge has no intrinsic power; in
interaction with the knower’s desires and purposes, knowledge has meaning and power.

(p. 50)

In analogous fashion, Foucault (1980) wrote that power is not possessed and passed to others but rather, like knowledge, is a dynamic social construction that is “employed” and “exercised” by individuals in particular contexts.

This power and knowledge connection is reflected by legitimacy and hierarchy in society and schools. Kliebard (1982) reminds us that “different segments in any society will emphasize different forms of knowledge as most valuable for that society or for different groups within that society” (p. 17). Regarding schooling, Apple (1995) observes that, historically, schools select the “knowledge of powerful groups, defining it as legitimate knowledge to be preserved and passed on” (p. 38). In short, certain knowledge has more legitimacy than others (McLaren, 1998).

Knowledge as Contested

Attempts to define knowledge legitimacy do not go undisputed. Schools and curricula are contested sites over what counts as legitimate knowledge as well as struggles for control over how such knowledge is to be transmitted and evaluated (Apple, 1995, 2003, 2006; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Bernstein, 1971; Cornbleth, 2000; Giroux, 1988; Kliebard, 1982; McLaren, 1998). Kliebard (1982) offers singular insight into curriculum contestation:

We do not find a monolithic supremacy exercised by one interest group; rather we find different interest groups competing for dominance over the curriculum. . . . Each of these interest groups, then, represents a force for a different selection of knowledge and values from the culture and hence a kind of lobby for a different curriculum. (p. 17)
Historical and present-day disputes illustrate the struggles over curriculum knowledge. An enduring division has been between proponents of highly standardized curriculum and those who consider schools as institutions for realizing societal change (Kliebard, 1982). As well, there have been ongoing debates in the United States over what literature should be included or removed from school libraries and polemics over whether certain religious teachings should be part of science instruction (Giroux, 1988). More recent cases of contestation are the 2010 ban of ethnic studies in Tuscon, Arizona public schools and the 2010 ruling on what content should be included in Texas public school social studies and history textbooks. These cases support Apple’s (2003) argument that what gets declared “official knowledge” in schools is the “result of conflicts and compromises both within the state and between the state and civil society” (p. 7).

2.3 Critical Educators’ Conceptualizations of Knowledge in the Official Curriculum

Schools as Political & Ideological Arenas of Contestation

In transitioning to critical educational theorists’ conceptualizations of knowledge in the official curriculum, it is first necessary to recognize that schools are political institutions (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Bennett & LeCompte, 1990; Freire, 2000; Giroux, 1988; Shor, 1992). As follows then, education is not neutral (Freire, 2000; Shor, 1992). “All forms of education are political because they can enable or inhibit the questioning habits of students, thus developing or disabling their critical relation to knowledge, schooling, and society” (Shor, 1992, pp. 12-13).

In addition to being political institutions and, as touched on in the previous section, schools are ideological arenas of contestation over whose and what knowledge is most legitimate in society and schooling (Apple, 1995, 2003, 2004; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Astiz et al.,
Schools represent sites of conflict over “who has the right to decide both what is to be taught and how teaching and learning are to be evaluated” (Apple, 2004, p. vii). The contestation of schooling is also evident in the fact that curricula are created, reformulated, contested, and even ignored across multiple levels and sites, from national, state, or municipal policies and curriculum standards to classroom pedagogical practices (Cornbleth, 2000). My research findings presented in Chapters 7 and 8 indicate this. This contestation is elemental for understanding connections between what is considered valid knowledge in schools and education policy, society, and roles of the state (Apple, 1995).

Schools not only reflect what is regarded as legitimate knowledge. They also act as productive forces in creating and legitimizing such knowledge (Apple, 1995; Gandin, 2007; Giroux, 1988). Giroux (1988) states:

Schools are places that represent forms of knowledge, language practices, social relations and values that are particular selections and exclusions from the wider culture. As such, schools serve to introduce and legitimate particular forms of social life. Rather than being objective institutions removed from the dynamics of politics and power, schools actually are contested spheres that embody and express a struggle over what forms of authority, types of knowledge, forms of moral regulation and versions of the past and future should be legitimated and transmitted to students. (p. 126)

Gandin (2007) speaks from a different standpoint:

The schools have a pedagogical role that is usually not taken into consideration. The school, being one of the most legitimate institutions to create and reproduce knowledge,
influences not only the children and adolescents that are inside classrooms, but also the larger public. . . . If the schools simply reproduce the hegemonic vertical relations, if schools act as another place where participation does not have a real value and where the voices of the oppressed are suppressed, something is being ‘taught’ to society. (p. 183)

**Curriculum Knowledge as Contested, Contextual & Hierarchically Stratified**

Curriculum knowledge lies at the core of such contestation over schooling (Apple, 1995, 2004; Bennett & LeCompte, 1990; Cornbleth, 2000). Curriculum knowledge refers to the “selection, organization, and treatment of knowledge in curriculum documents and curriculum practice including opportunities made available to students to critique and construct as well as to receive knowledge” (Cornbleth, 2000, pp. 211-212). Bennett and LeCompte’s (1990) explanation encapsulates the political and disputed nature of curriculum knowledge:

The debate about what knowledge should be included in the curricula . . . is as old as the public schools themselves. Since schools are highly political institutions, the content and form of instruction depends, in large part, upon which socioeconomic interests wield power in society. Since different groups disagree both over the relative value which should be accorded to different kinds of knowledge and the appropriateness of varying kinds of knowledge for different classes or groups of people, there has never been a consensus over which body of knowledge was most appropriate for all the children. (pp. 182-183)

Curriculum knowledge then is situated within a broader economic, political, and historical context together with the institutional milieu of schools (Cornbleth, 1995; McNeil, 1988). Such knowledge has historically been shaped by “tensions” between what can be
conflicting aims of schooling and roles of the state (Samoff, 2003b). A prime tension is between the educational system’s expected function of stimulating economic growth in relation to the global market and what may be incompatible goals of educating for citizenship and societal transformation such as redressing inequalities (McNeil, 1988; Samoff, 2003b). Additionally, “teachers, textbooks, examinations, local and state policies, national policies, academic and public discourse, and experience or tradition interact in shaping curriculum knowledge” (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990, p. 182).

A related characteristic of curriculum knowledge is that it is hierarchically stratified. That is, some knowledge is considered superior to others (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990; Young, 1971). “What gets labeled as high status knowledge in the schools . . . provide legitimacy to certain forms of knowledge and social practices” and is connected with “certain values and questions of power and control” (Giroux, 1988, p. 5). Critical scholars point out another problematic element underlying knowledge legitimacy and hierarchy. “Out of the vast universe of possible knowledge, only some knowledge and ways of organizing it get declared to be legitimate or ‘official’ ” (Apple, 2003, p. 7). What gets taught in schools is only representative of a tiny fraction of possible knowledge to draw from (Apple, 2004; Cornbleth, 2000). Williams (as cited in Cornbleth, 2000, p. 167) refers to this as a “selective tradition” of schooling. In other words, only certain knowledge is deemed worthwhile.

Power is therefore at work in the curriculum. “It defines what counts as legitimate forms of school knowledge” (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993, p. 135). The relation of power and knowledge is also evident in schools where certain knowledge is disseminated over others in classrooms. An observation among critical educators is that all too often students’ knowledge
based on how they make sense of their lived realities is subjugated in favor of predetermined “academic” knowledge (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; M. A. Butler, 1998; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 1998; Sleeter & Grant, 1991). This is explicated later in this chapter. Critical educators thereby assert that it is necessary to examine whose and what knowledge is legitimized and transmitted, as well as how and why it is done so (Apple, 2003, 2004; McLaren, 1998).

The Classification & Framing of Knowledge in the Official Curriculum

Curriculum knowledge legitimacy is exhibited in the official curriculum. The official curriculum, also known as the formal or mandated curriculum, is “that curriculum which is officially recognized. It is public, available for all who ask for it and is meant to be explicit” (Portelli, 1993, p. 343). Cornbleth’s (2000) definition of curriculum knowledge as “the selection, organization, and treatment of knowledge in curriculum documents” comprises the official curriculum (p. 211). The official curriculum conveys conceptions of knowledge as well as how such knowledge should be taught and learned. Benavot and Resh (2001) elaborate that the official curriculum:

- Defines a select corpus of cultural knowledge (e.g., basic linguistic and numerical skills, accounts of historical origins, political conceptions, and community values and norms) that is to be imparted to, and internalized by, the younger generation as part of a planned sequence of school-based experiences and educational practices. (p. 504)

My conceptual framework for examining knowledge in the official national and municipal elementary school curriculum in Brazil draws on one of Basil Bernstein’s contributions to sociological and educational thought. While much of Bernstein’s work centered on language and social class (Scott, 2008), it is his concern with “how a society selects,
classifies, distributes, transmits, and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public” that aligns with my interest in understanding curriculum knowledge in Brazil (Bernstein, 1971, p. 47). Bernstein (1971) contended that “curriculum defines what counts as valid knowledge” and “pedagogy defines what counts as valid transmission of knowledge” (p. 48).

Bernstein’s (1971) concepts of the classification and framing of curriculum knowledge offer a framework for deconstructing knowledge legitimacy across the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy web. Collectively, classification and framing delineate “boundaries” between curriculum subjects or knowledge areas, between curriculum and everyday knowledge, and between what is and is not intended to be transmitted in classrooms and how (Bernstein, 1971; Scott, 2008). Classification speaks to the organization and treatment of knowledge in the official curriculum. It can be understood as the “degree of integration among different knowledge domains” (Scott, 2008, p. 76). This is typically evidenced by the organization of knowledge into subjects or curriculum knowledge areas. Classification is also reflected by the insulation between curriculum knowledge and other knowledge such as that from communities (Bernstein, 1971). Classification is therefore not concerned with the divisions and organization within knowledge areas, but rather with the relationships between knowledge in the curriculum (Bernstein, 1971; Scott, 2008). As well, classification is portrayed by the differential emphasis on certain knowledge (Bernstein, 1971). “Classification refers to what counts as ‘good quality’ knowledge” (Abbas & McLean, 2007, p. 731). The stronger the classification, the more explicit is the demarcation of knowledge domains, the thicker the boundaries between them, and the greater the hierarchical treatment of certain knowledge over others (Bernstein, 1971). Hence, these relationships also display status differences among knowledge in the curriculum.
Framing has primarily been referenced with regard to the link between knowledge and pedagogy in the enacted curriculum. “This includes organisation, selection, sequence, pacing and timing, as well as student/staff relations” (Abbas & McLean, 2007, p. 729). In this sense framing denotes the intended pedagogical relationship between teachers and students as well as speaks to what knowledge is transmitted and how (Bernstein, 1971). Yet framing also indicates the extent to which certain knowledge is predetermined or standardized in the official curriculum: how explicit and minutely specified such knowledge is (Scott, 2008). Similarly, framing reveals how prescriptively mapped out intended pedagogical practices are (Scott, 2008; Sleeter & Stillman, 2005). Strong degrees of framing are reflected in highly prescriptive and detailed curricula that outline what is to be taught and how. Weak framing is a characteristic of curricula in which teachers and students have greater authority to incorporate and examine their own knowledge, experiences, and local realities rather than simply adhere to the official curriculum.

Bernstein’s framework has been used in educational research on curriculum in the United States and Europe. Sleeter and Stillman (2005) examine power and legitimacy in California’s official public school curriculum. They find that it is strongly classified and framed. They write that “compliance is enforced” through standardized testing, textbooks, and “the sheer prescriptiveness of a packed curriculum” (p. 43). Abbas and McLean (2007) utilize classification and framing to compare biases embedded within notions of pedagogical quality in higher education in England and Northern Ireland. Whitty (2010) argues that classification and framing are useful concepts for analyzing the pedagogical challenges and possible benefits of recent curriculum reform in England for “socially disadvantaged” youth.

While there are potential pitfalls of oversimplification through the lenses of any
framework, classification and framing shed light on how knowledge is conceptualized in the official curriculum. They also provide a springboard for examining how such conceptualization relates to pedagogy and knowledge in the enacted curriculum. Analysis of the strength of classification and framing raises awareness of the boundaries between curriculum and everyday knowledge, as well as the intended authority teachers and students have in shaping curriculum knowledge (Bernstein, 1971). Additionally, the hierarchical relationship among different knowledge can be traced by recognizing the division between the knowledge teachers and students bring to classrooms and the knowledge preordained for transmission in the official curriculum. The intended control over curriculum knowledge thus yields insight into determinations about “the kinds of knowledge and people selected as legitimate within the schools” (Apple, 1995, p. 52).

Classification & Framing in Relation to Interdisciplinarity & Transversality

There has been no known application of Bernstein’s concepts of classification and framing to curriculum in Brazil. This is significant as his framework is useful for deconstructing the conceptualization of the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy nexus in public elementary school curricula documents as well as for understanding knowledge dynamics across the official and enacted curriculum there. Most notably, it is uniquely suited to make sense of the two intertwined pedagogical tenets intended to traverse national, municipal, and school levels of curriculum: interdisciplinarity and transversality.

The aforementioned PCNs are national curriculum guidelines envisioned as a way to guarantee a quality education for all public school students. The notion of quality largely centers on educating students for participatory citizenship and societal transformation. While the PCNs
are organized by the “knowledge areas” of Portuguese, math, history, geography and science, they also address the need to include pressing societal issues in the curriculum. The PCNs propose that the way to do so is using a thematic approach called transversality, also referred to as contextualization.

In a transversal or contextualized curriculum, “knowledge transmitted through conventional areas such as Portuguese, mathematics, sciences, history, and geography . . . is not enough to attain the goal of educating for citizenship” (Moraes, 2003, p. 208). Rather, national “transversal themes” such as the environment and locally determined and relevant themes like violence are to be integrated throughout the curriculum, traversing all disciplines or knowledge areas (Brasil, 1997c; Macedo, 1998, 1999; Moraes, 2003). In this way contextualization is predicated on establishing connections between curriculum knowledge and societal realities in order to help “students acquire a wide and comprehensive vision of reality as well as their insertion and participation in this reality” (Moraes, 2003, p. 208). The experiences and knowledge students bring to classrooms are considered an essential part of this connection between school and society (Brasil, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c). Contextualization is therefore meant to replace the traditional disciplinary curriculum. The latter has been criticized for de-contextualizing and fragmenting knowledge as students switch from one subject or knowledge area to another in disconnected fashion, within predefined time constraints, and during which students’ lived experiences are suppressed in favor of predetermined curriculum knowledge (Macedo, 1999).

Interdisciplinarity is viewed as a necessary companion of contextualization for engaging with and attempting to transform societal realities (Domingues, Toschi, & Oliveira, 2000;
Macedo, 1999). Interdisciplinarity encompasses a range of epistemological and pedagogical traditions and interpretations (Domingues et al., 2000; Thiesen, 2008). Thiesen (2008) notes that interdisciplinarity in the education field in Brazil has been influenced by, among others, Piaget (constructivism), Gardner (multiple intelligences), Vygotsky (sociocultural theory), and Freire (liberation pedagogy). One common notion of interdisciplinarity is that it reflects a break from the positivist vision of knowledge as objective, fragmented information (Moraes, 2003). Another conception is that interdisciplinarity departs from a disciplinary treatment of knowledge in schools through the integration of curriculum disciplines. For example, the PCNs summarize it as the “relation between disciplines” (Brasil, 1997c, p. 39). A third interpretation is that interdisciplinarity means integrating curriculum content areas to generate knowledge about “fundamental issues” in society (Wong & Balestino, 2003). Not surprisingly, the concept remains ambiguous in the PCNs (Domingues et al., 2000; Macedo, 1999).

Macedo (1998, 1999) perceives various contradictions and ambiguities about interdisciplinarity and transversality/contextualization in the PCNs. First, the PCNs endorse interdisciplinarity as a tenet, yet lack clear illustrations of this principle (Macedo, 1999). As well, the disciplinary, fragmented organization of curriculum knowledge is ironic given that the argument for an interdisciplinary curriculum is to prepare students to bring about societal change (Macedo, 1999). What’s more, the PCNs propose that transversal themes integrate the knowledge areas yet without indicating how such integration might take place or specifying how each knowledge area relates to the themes (Macedo, 1999). Macedo (1998, 1999) points out this is because the traditional disciplines and not societal realities in the form of transversal themes are the organizational logic of the PCNs. So, despite being touted as equally important, the
organization of the PCNs implies that the transversal themes and, therefore societal realities, are less important than the traditional knowledge areas (Macedo, 1998, 1999).

These official curriculum ambiguities and contradictions also might hinder the realization of interdisciplinarity and contextualization in the enacted curriculum. Macedo (1998, 1999) reasons that the disciplinary, segmented treatment of knowledge areas in the official curriculum, together with how schools are organized around such, make it difficult for teachers to integrate knowledge areas and school and society. This is striking given that interdisciplinarity and contextualization are presented as foundations for a quality education. It is also noteworthy since these principles suggest that public school teachers “transform their educational practice in ways that better meet the educational interests and needs of marginalized youth” (Wong & Balestino, 2003, p. 78).

Macedo’s points relate to those of Beane (1995). Beane calls interdisciplinary curricula “pretenders” of integrated curricula. He clarifies that the former tend to retain disciplinary organizational features. He adds that integrated curricula, which I further describe in the next section, draw on traditional disciplines but apply such knowledge in integrated ways through projects and in response to societal issues. However, Beane cautions that integrated curricula pose challenges to academicians whose careers are dependent upon subject-centered curricula and explains that school organization and teachers’ identities and status are based on disciplinarity. He also acknowledges that integrated curricula might be resisted by parents and students, and that they might be a threat to certain political and economic interests.

In spite of the prominence given to the tenets of interdisciplinarity and contextualization in Brazil’s curriculum documents, it is important to recognize that “the power of curriculum
policy to bring about change in classroom practice ought not to be overestimated" (Cornbleth, 1995, p. 182). Numerous factors intersect in molding curriculum knowledge and wedging gaps and contradictions between the official and enacted realms of curriculum (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Benavot & Resh, 2001; Giroux, 1988; Marsh & Willis, 2003; Santos, 2002).

2.4 Critical Educators’ Conceptualizations of Knowledge in the Enacted Curriculum

I draw on Portelli and Vibert’s (2002) definition of curriculum together with Tabulawa’s (2004) understanding of classrooms as a foundation for portraying critical educators’ conceptualizations of knowledge in the enacted curriculum. Portelli and Vibert define curriculum as a “dynamic relationship among teachers, students, knowledge, and contexts” (2002, p. 36). For Tabulawa (2004), the classroom is a “dynamic system in which teacher and students are not ‘pawns’ but are instead active agents operating within contextual constraints. . . . Teachers and students exercise power on one another, leading to the co-construction of classroom reality” (p. 58). Teachers and students therefore forge classroom realities (Apple, 1995, 2004; Giroux, 1988; Giroux & Simon, 1989; Tabulawa, 2004). Knowledge in the enacted curriculum is imparted, deconstructed, and constructed among teachers and students (Cornbleth, 2000).

Contesting Curriculum Standardization

Before describing the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy nexus espoused by critical educators, it is instructive to present why they contest attempts to standardize curriculum. They assert that a single standard is elitist, undemocratic, and exclusionary (Freire, 1992; Portelli & Vibert, 2001; Wien & Dudley-Marling, 1998). Portelli and Vibert (2001) contend, “The forceful emphasis on common standards contradicts popular notions of democracy which, by definition,
rule out emphasis on conformity” (p. 69). In a related vein, Wien and Dudley-Marling (1998) claim that standardized curricula and testing lead to increased “surveillance and control” of teaching and learning and “comprise an authoritarian, undemocratic vision of schools in which previous generations have predetermined all that is worth knowing” (p. 411).

Critical educational theorists also argue that standards reflect problematic versions of what counts as legitimate knowledge in schools. Such legitimization is interlinked with attempted centralized control over curriculum knowledge and pedagogy and, as previously mentioned, ideology, power relations, and the aims of the state (Apple, 1995, 2003, 2004, 2006; Berlak, 1999; Bernstein, 1971; Giroux, 1988; Rodriguez, 2006). Berlak (1999) explains:

> What is often lost sight of is that what appears to be a straightforward and sincere effort to raise standards requires the development of so-called “content standards.” These content standards become “curriculum frameworks” or “guidelines,” which are detailed outlines of the body of information, ideas, and sets of skills that are to be learned in every school subject. The “frameworks” or “guidelines” also tell us what is and is not considered a legitimate school subject. . . . Raising standards, a laudable goal, is thus reduced to a drive to standardize curriculum and pedagogy. (para. 4)

Curriculum standardization thereby entails teaching certain knowledge while excluding others. “The acquisition of such knowledge becomes the structuring principle around which the school curriculum is organized and particular classroom social relations legitimated” (Giroux, 1988, p. 89). Rodriguez (2006) refers to such an enacted curriculum as a “pasture.” He states that students “consume and regurgitate the official knowledge via standardised tests and/or other traditional assessments without having to demonstrate any deep understanding of the subject matter or how
such knowledge impacts on or is relevant to their lives” (p. 804).

The neutral, decontextualized view of knowledge is a further criticism of curriculum standardization by critical educators. Various authors have written about how a standardized curriculum conceptualizes knowledge as objective information for teachers to transmit to students (Apple, 1995, 2003, 2006; Giroux, 1988; Ohanian, 1999; Sleeter & Stillman, 2005). Giroux (1988) elaborates:

Knowledge in the dominant curriculum model is treated primarily as a realm of objective facts. That is, knowledge appears objective in that it is external to the individual. . . . As something external, knowledge . . . no longer is seen as something to be questioned, analyzed, and negotiated. Instead, it becomes something to be managed and mastered. . . . This view of knowledge is usually accompanied by top-to-bottom classroom social relationships conducive to communiques, not communication. Control, not learning, appears to have a high priority in the traditional curriculum model. (p. 14)

Apple (1995) says that this notion of prepackaged knowledge and the envisioned pedagogical process become “predetermined” in curricula. Giroux (1988) adds that teachers are expected to teach and follow “predetermined content and instructional procedures” whereby “knowledge is broken down into discrete parts, standardized for easier management and consumption, and measured through predefined forms of assessment” (p. 124).

What’s more, a standardized curriculum parallels a banking education (Freire, 2000). “Education becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (Freire, 2000, p. 72). Students learn, for instance, that Belém is the capital of Pará state in Brazil but without examining the significance of “what Belém means for

Critical educators see negative consequences of such a curriculum. Children learn to regard teachers, texts, and tests as the sources of knowledge, and that answers are either correct or incorrect rather than seeing knowledge as complex and contextually situated (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990). Britzman (1989) similarly maintains that students are negated as possessors and constructors of knowledge. Not only does this ignore the interrelation of students’ experiences, knowledge, and their learning as Cornbleth (2000) observes. It promotes a “singular view of truth” (Berlak, 1999, para. 6). Such a curriculum also implies “knowledge and the world are fixed and are fine the way they are, with no role for students to play in transforming them” (Shor, 1992, p. 12).

Critically Engaging with Students’ Knowledge, Experiences & Local Realities

In contrast, critical educators argue that curriculum should be contextualized by incorporating students’ experiences, knowledge, and local realities (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Banks, 1993; M. A. Butler, 1998; Freire, 1998, 2000; Giroux & Simon, 1989; McLaren, 1998; Shor, 1992; Sleeter & Grant, 1991; Wong & Balestino, 2003). This entails investigating how students explain reality in relation to the contexts of their lives (M. A. Butler, 1998). Freire (2000) referred to this as the examination of “generative themes” in people’s lives. He held that it was essential to take “into consideration the conditions in which they are living and the importance of the knowledge derived from life experience, which they bring with them to school. I can in no way underestimate such knowledge” (Freire, 1998, p. 62).

In addition, critical educators maintain that the realities students face in everyday life and
how students make sense of such should be the starting points of the curriculum (M. A. Butler, 1998; Giroux, 1988; Shor, 1992). Such a curriculum has been referred to as a *curriculum of life* (Portelli & Vibert, 2002). For them a curriculum of life is:

> Grounded in the immediate daily world of students as well as in the larger social and political contexts of their lives. As such, students’ worlds and lives are not addressed as factors that need to be excused, pitied, mediated, or fixed in order to get on with the curriculum, but as the vital ground of or for learning. (pp. 78-79)

A curriculum of life aligns with Beane’s (1995) notion of *curriculum integration*. Beane lists several features of an integrated curriculum. First, “the sources of curriculum ought to be problems, issues, and concerns posed by life itself” (p. 616). This is in opposition to focusing on the “mastery of fragmented information within the boundaries of subject areas” (p. 622). Second, an integrated curriculum is organized into themes based on these life issues. Third, in contrast to subject-centered curricula which marginalize students’ lived experiences and are irrelevant to their needs, an integrated curriculum is geared towards students’ lives. Fourth, such a curriculum “concerns the active construction of meanings rather than the passive assimilation of others’ meanings” (p. 622).

Incorporating students’ knowledge, experiences, and local realities into the enacted curriculum is important for a host of reasons. The knowledge that is “generated and learned within the context of everyday life structures how students think about themselves, their world, and experience” (Sleeter & Grant, 1991, p. 52). Banks (1993) likewise argues, “The assumptions, perspectives, and insights that students derive from their experiences in their homes and community cultures are used as screens to view and interpret the knowledge and experiences that
they encounter in the school” (p. 7). Therefore, teachers can “foster educational experiences for their students that will illuminate the political richness and social complexity of the interplay between what is learned in school and the experience of everyday life” (Giroux, 1988, p. 53). Doing so legitimates students’ interrelated knowledge and experiences in the enacted curriculum (McLaren, 1998). This legitimization is consequential because it “affirms their lived experience and encourages their power to examine the world” (M. A. Butler, 1998, p. 108).

Saxe’s (1988) research comparing math skills young candy sellers developed on Brazil’s streets with what they were taught in school underscores the importance of this interplay between knowledge students bring to school and curriculum knowledge. The knowledge students gain through everyday experiences can comprise equally or even more complex concepts than those learned in school (Saxe, 1988). As well, knowledge learned in each context can serve as foundations for learning in the other (Saxe, 1988). In this way, students can learn from yet also question math and other knowledge in relation to themes from their lives (Freire, 2000).

Bridging curriculum knowledge with students’ experiences and knowledge also increases the probability that students will do better in and get more out of their school experience. Sleeter and Grant (1991) note that such a connection means that students are apt to be more interested in and empowered by their school experience. As well, Combleth (2000) writes that schooling has greater “credibility” with students when curriculum knowledge overlaps their knowledge and experiences. Students are also more likely to succeed in school if instruction integrates rather than subordinates their knowledge and ways of representing such (Bartolomé, 1994).

On the other hand, curriculum knowledge disconnected from students’ intertwined knowledge and experiences can have debilitating effects. “Too often the school is a place where
these knowledges are ignored and/or intentionally shut out. . . . This results in children losing interest in school and, many times, also losing interest in themselves and their worldly purposes” (M. A. Butler, 1998, p. 108). Such exclusion can be disabling to the extent to which students are silenced in the learning process (Sleeter & Grant, 1991). This speaks to Giroux’s (1988) concept of voice: how students “interpret and articulate experience” (McLaren, 1998, p. 220). That is, disregarding the knowledge students bring to school can “disconfirm the voices of these students” (McLaren, 1998, p. 186). This silencing of students’ voices has been a characteristic of traditional schooling with the transmission of predetermined knowledge that can be quantifiably measured on standardized tests (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; M. A. Butler, 1998; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 1998; Sleeter & Grant, 1991). McLaren (1998) states:

Teachers need to understand how experiences produced in the various domains of everyday life produce in turn the different voices students employ to give meaning to their worlds and, consequently, to their existence in the large society. . . . It is crucial, therefore, that educators address the question of how the social world is experienced, mediated, and produced by students. . . . Unfortunately, most approaches to teaching and learning treat knowledge as an isolated product of meaning and abjectly deny the knowledge and social forms out of which students give relevance to their lives and experience. (p. 218)

This is particularly so concerning the tendency to not validate the everyday knowledge of lower socioeconomic class children (Sleeter & Grant, 1991).

Critical educators do not regard the enacted curriculum as a forum for celebrating students’ knowledge and experiences, however. Rather, they uphold the notion that local realities
and the knowledge and experiences students (and teachers) bring to class should be critically examined and discussed (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Banks, 1993; Darder et al., 2003; Freire, 1998; Gandin & Apple, 2002; Giroux, 1988; Giroux & Simon, 1989; McLaren, 1998; Portelli & Vibert, 2002; Vibert & Shields, 2003; Wong & Balestino, 2003). This means challenging students to reflect on their lives and “how they construct what they perceive as truth” (Darder et al., 2003, p. 11). Freire’s (1998) questions are relevant to my research contexts in this respect:

Why not, for example, take advantage of the students’ experience of life in those parts of the city neglected by the authorities to discuss the problems of pollution in the rivers and the question of poverty and the risks to health from the rubbish heaps in such areas? . . . Why not discuss with the students the concrete reality of their lives and that aggressive reality in which violence is permanent and where people are much more familiar with death than with life? Why not establish an “intimate” connection between knowledge considered basic to any school curriculum and knowledge that is the fruit of the lived experience of these students as individuals? (p. 36)

The concepts of interdisciplinarity and contextualization promulgated in Brazil’s public school curriculum documents carry similar prominence for critical educators. “Interdisciplinarity and contextualization comprise the first significant mandate in federal policy for . . . the inclusion of marginalized youth and their realities in the day-to-day workings of public classrooms” (Wong & Balestino, 2003, pp. 77-78). Interdisciplinarity for them is not just integrating knowledge areas but rather is predicated on students’ construction of knowledge about their local reality and lived experiences (Wong & Balestino, 2003). Contextualization implies that teachers “build on the experiences and knowledge brought to the classroom by
marginalized youth” in order to better understand, critique, and legitimize such experiences and knowledge (Wong & Balestino, 2003, p. 78). What’s more, contextualization:

Opens up possibilities for the development of curriculum that is oriented toward issues, concepts, and problems present in students’ realities rather than focusing on a catalogue of facts and ideas that are distant from and possibly even contradictory to the real interests and needs of this population. (Wong & Balestino, 2003, p. 78)

This is notable for my research contexts where public schooling continues to be “at complete odds with” the realities of “poor, nonwhite communities” (Almeida, 2003, p. 43).

This conceptualization of the enacted curriculum embodies the term critical engagement, which I have chosen based on concepts presented in literature. To deconstruct this term, I draw on Leistyna’s (2007) definition of the word critical. Critical means “being able to understand, analyze, pose questions, and affect the sociopolitical and economic realities that shape our lives” (p. 117). I use the word engagement to convey how teachers and students address what McMahon and Portelli (2004) call “substantive issues” in their lives. These issues include local realities such as violence. The engagement with such would involve examination of how these have been experienced and how students and teachers make sense of them. The concept of critical engagement then is congruent with what Vibert and Shields (2003) describe as “student engagement” through a critical/transformative perspective:

Through this lens, the purpose of education is not so much preparatory as urgent; that is, it is the purpose of education to take up, examine, and work on the world as it presents itself to students (and teachers) here and now. . . . Characteristic of a critical pedagogy is an explicit taking up of questions and issues often deemed sensitive or
controversial within schools, and a view of curriculum as grounded in the lives and experiences of students. From a critical perspective, engagement in learning and school life is a form of engagement in and with the world at large. (p. 228)

Critical educators outline benefits of such a critical curriculum. For one, students can be challenged to note how their knowledge is shaped by their experiences (Banks, 1993), as well as examine how their knowledge and experiences relate to social, historical realities (Darder et al., 2003). Critically examining how knowledge is contextually situated, constructed, and legitimated can also transform students’ and teachers’ conceptions of valid knowledge, including how knowledge “misrepresents or marginalizes particular views of the world and for the way it provides a deeper understanding of how the student’s world is actually constructed” (McLaren, 1998, p. 186). This cognizance fosters “a critical understanding of how social reality works” and is sustained (Giroux, 1988, p. 184). Furthermore, Vibert and Shields (2003) write that “raising issues from the socio-political contexts of the children’s lives” helps students grasp societal inequities and “reflect on how such inequities come to be and on ways we might address and redress them” (p. 237). This connects to Freire’s (2000) notion of conscientização, or critical awareness of reality. Such consciousness enables people to “come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (Freire, 2000, p. 83). Leistyna (2007) elucidates, “Developing critical consciousness isn’t an exercise to get people to think in a certain way; rather, it is intended to get them to think more deeply about the issues and relations of power that affect them” (p. 117).

An example of the critical engagement with students’ experiences, knowledge, and local realities has been documented in Gandin and Apple’s (2002) account of the municipal Citizen
Schools of Porto Alegre, Brazil. There, the theme of community standard of living was chosen with sub-themes of rural exodus, social organization, and property. Issues relating to these sub-themes such as marginalization and overpopulation were then examined (Gandin & Apple, 2002). Students developed greater awareness of such issues while “knowledge that is connected to and organized around the lives of the most disadvantaged members of our communities” was legitimized in the curriculum (Gandin & Apple, 2002, p. 259).

**Pedagogy: A Political & Contextual Practice**

Critical educators conceptualize pedagogy as more than methodology or technique for the transmission of content. For them, it is a political practice (Freire, 1998; Giroux, 2004; Giroux & Simon, 1989; McLaren, 1998; Shor, 1992; Sprague, 1992; Tabulawa, 1997). Giroux and Simon (1989) regard pedagogy as “a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge and identities are produced within and among particular sets of social relations” (p. 239). The political quality of pedagogy is likewise evident when considering that pedagogy, regardless of its form, reflects notions of valid knowledge and how such knowledge should be evaluated and engaged with in classrooms (Shor, 1992; Tabulawa, 1997). Pedagogy is also understood as a political practice in that it centers on addressing and redressing societal issues rather than catering to students’ personal interests and goals. The aim of critical pedagogy is bringing about social justice and more democratic communities (Giroux, 2004; Sprague, 1992; Vibert & Shields, 2003). “Critical pedagogies locate engagement in their communal and social interests” (Vibert & Shields, 2003, p. 233). In short then, pedagogy for critical educators is society-centered. This parallels the conception of pedagogy in the national, municipal, and school curriculum documents of my research contexts (Brasil, 1997a; SEMEC, 2008; SMEC, 2006).
In an overlapping vein, critical educators consider pedagogy as contextually situated and oriented. Tabulawa (1997) describes how pedagogy in Botswana stems from European, religious missionary, and indigenous roots. Giroux (2004) writes about “linking pedagogy to the specificity of place” (p. 38). “Pedagogy can never be treated as a fixed set of principles and practices that can be applied indiscriminately across a variety of pedagogical sites” but rather “must always be contextually defined” (p. 37). Giroux (2004) and Freire (1998) also address the contextually oriented characteristic of pedagogy by conceptualizing it as an “intervention” in the world.

The concepts of directive knowledge and empowerment are central to the political and contextual notions of pedagogy. The former means that curriculum knowledge should have a “socio-political application” and facilitate students’ understanding of connections between school and society (Giroux, 1988). Curriculum knowledge also should “help students participate in vital issues that affect their experience on a daily level” (McLaren, 1998, p. 186). In this regard knowledge becomes “transformative” (McLaren, 1998). Critical educators likewise believe that schooling should empower students (Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 1998; Shor, 1992; Sleeter & Grant, 1991). McLaren (1998) defines empowerment as “helping students to understand and engage the world around them” and “enabling them to exercise the kind of courage needed to change the social order where necessary” (pp. 185-186). Sleeter and Grant (1991) add, “What we are advocating is bridging school knowledge or public knowledge and students’ own cultural knowledge, and thus encouraging students to analyze this interaction and then use the knowledge learned to take charge of their circumstances” (p. 66).

For critical educators an empowering curriculum centers on dialogue. Such a curriculum
“begins with the assumption that all people have the capacity and ability to produce knowledge” (Darder et al., 2003, p. 14). On this note, Freire (1998) conceptualized pedagogy not as the “transfer” of knowledge but the creation of “the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge” (p. 30). Sadeghi (2008) expounds:

The dialogical approach contrasts with the anti-dialogical method, which positions the teacher as the transmitter of knowledge, a hierarchical framework that leads to domination and oppression through the silencing of students’ knowledge and experiences. . . . Dialogue can engage teacher and students in an interactive exchange about their lives, where social, economic, political and cultural issues are addressed critically. (para. 14)

A dialogical pedagogy implies that students and teachers act as “critical co-investigators in dialogue” as they analyze their experiences and knowledge to create new knowledge (Banks, 1993; Bartlett, 2005; Darder et al., 2003; Freire, 2000, p. 81; Freire & Macedo, 1995; Shor, 1992). In doing so, students and teachers co-develop the curriculum (Shor, 1992). Consequently, students’ “lived experiences cannot be ignored or relegated to the periphery” (Darder et al., 2003, p. 15). Instead, a dialogical curriculum affords opportunities for students to “examine their learning in school, their everyday experience, and the conditions in society” (Shor, 1992, p. 12).

Complexities & Contradictions of Curriculum Reform via Decentralization/Centralization

The above-mentioned conceptualizations align with the tradition of critical pedagogy in Brazil, including the official vision for public schooling (Brasil, 1997a). Nonetheless, Brazilian scholars identify gaps and contradictions between paper and practice in public schools in Brazil. Domingues et al. (2000, p. 75), while writing about high schools, cite four factors relevant to
elementary schooling: (a) incongruities between promulgated pedagogical principles and textbooks, (b) persistent disciplinary paradigms and practices, (c) the prevalence and importance of disciplinary standardized tests, and (d) a tradition of “knowledge transmission” practices. In addition, as previously noted, the traditional disciplines rather than transversal themes continue serving as the basis for public school curricula (Macedo, 1998, 1999). Further, interdisciplinarity and contextualization imply a “radical change in teaching practice” that conflicts with teachers’ experiences in compartmentalized and de-contextualized curricula (Moraes, 2003, p. 208).

Research from Mexico, Indonesia, Ghana, and Botswana is instructive for making sense of the complications and contradictions within education reform and curriculum knowledge dynamics in Brazil. Tattoo (1999) exposes how centralized accountability mechanisms in Mexico have been used by the federal government to maintain control over curriculum in spite of purported devolution of curricular authority to state and local levels. Bjork’s (2003) ethnographic research uncovers the difficulties of the decentralization of curricular control in Indonesia. He highlights the discord between decentralization policies endorsed by the World Bank and the context of East Java, schooling traditions, and new visions of teachers as autonomous producers of curricula. A central finding is that the idea of a localized curriculum has been restricted to paper and “neither curriculum nor pedagogy is being transformed” (p. 199). As with Bjork, Osei’s (2010) study on Ghana finds that curriculum decentralization on paper has had minimal effect on teachers’ practices. He attributes this to incompatibilities between the principles of localized curriculum and the traditional roles of teachers as civil servants. Lastly, Tabulawa (1997) discerns that the call for Botswana teachers to adopt more learner-centered practices
necessitates a profound paradigmatic shift in thinking about curriculum, knowledge, and pedagogy, including teachers’ and students’ roles.

2.5 Conclusion

Spotlighting relations among global forces of neoliberalism, educational decentralization/centralization policies, official and enacted curricula, and local realities is pivotal for understanding municipal school curricula knowledge dynamics in Brazil’s Northeast. Given the influence of critical educational thought on curriculum in Brazil and the recognition that education policies reflect contested control of curriculum knowledge, critical educators’ conceptualizations of the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy web offer a framework for investigating the classification and framing of knowledge in the official curriculum and how and why certain knowledge is engaged with in the enacted curriculum in municipal elementary schools. This examination is significant given the dearth of inquiry into how decentralization/centralization policies affect curriculum and the insufficient understanding of knowledge across the official–enacted curriculum span in Brazil and elsewhere. Chapter 3 details my research methodology, which uses a sub-national comparative ethnographic case study to address these gaps.
Chapter 3 – Research Methodology

I used a comparative ethnographic case study to examine the curriculum knowledge dynamics of two municipal public elementary schools, one in Salvador, Bahia and the other in Teresina, Piauí. This examination was informed by critical theorists’ conceptualizations of knowledge and knowledge in the official and enacted curriculum. I utilized the techniques of document analysis, observations, and interviews to collect data across the official and enacted curriculum in each context. This chapter outlines my research methodology, beginning with how such is situated in a critical theoretical framework.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

My research on curriculum knowledge dynamics in Northeast Brazil draws on critical educators’ afore-detailed conceptualizations of knowledge and knowledge in the official and enacted curriculum. Critical theoretical foundations provide unique angles for scrutinizing the classification and framing of knowledge in official curriculum documents. Such scrutiny is essential for making sense of the conceptualization of the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy nexus in the official curriculum and how such relates to classroom pedagogy. It is helpful for uncovering to what extent public school curricula in places like Bahia in Brazil are contextualized or whether, as alleged, they conflict with the realities of surrounding communities (Almeida, 2003). This awareness is of relevance throughout the country as the official National Curriculum Parameters and municipal curriculum guidelines are to be tailored to local contextual realities and re-articulated at the school level (Brasil, 1997a; SEMEC, 2008; SMEC, 2006).

Using a critical theoretical framework to investigate what counts as valid knowledge in classrooms and how such is engaged with and why fills notable research gaps. Heyman (1979)
claimed that the “comparative study of education must begin with the study of the everyday life of education as it is lived by all those who participate in any of its aspects” (p. 248). However, few comparative studies of how the official curriculum is enacted have been undertaken (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Benavot & Resh, 2001). Moreover, there has been a “lack of discussion about what should be valued as knowledge” in schools (Gandin, 2007, p. 179). Critical educators’ descriptions of schooling and curriculum as contested political and ideological arenas reflecting notions of legitimate knowledge and pedagogy highlight the interrelation among curriculum texts and practices, contextual realities, education policy, and transnational influences like neoliberalism. A critical theoretical framework is therefore compatible with a comparative ethnographic case study for analyzing curriculum knowledge dynamics, including participants’ perspectives, across municipalities and curricula within a sub-national context.

3.2 Comparative Ethnographic Case Study

My research is a qualitative study. Qualitative studies use an inductive, multi-method procedure to portray the complexity of and identify patterns emerging from collected data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 2002). Qualitative research also involves understanding a context through an observer’s firsthand experience, together with representations and interpretations of this world through interviews, field notes, observations, and other means (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). “This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). A key advantage to qualitative research is that it enables researchers to get “inside the black box” in order to “understand not just that a particular thing happened, but how and why it happened” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 434). My
qualitative research focused on understanding classroom pedagogical practices and participants’ perspectives as I immersed myself for one semester in each context studied (Esterberg, 2002).

**Ethnography**

Within the spectrum of qualitative research, my study is ethnographic. Ethnography in educational research connotes wide-ranging meanings, uses, and traditions (Brewer, 2000; Gordon, Holland, & Lahelma, 2002; Hammersley, 2006; Pole & Morrison, 2003). In spite of the variety of conceptualizations, common features distinguish ethnography from other forms of qualitative research. These include the reliance on “flexible methods of data collection,” a focus on “people’s ordinary activities in naturally occurring settings,” the active involvement of the researcher in the study, and the investigation of the significance of human activity in a particular context (Brewer, 2000, p. 20). In this way, ethnography is “based on the first-hand experience of social action within a discrete location, in which the objective is to collect data which will convey the subjective reality of the lived experience of those who inhabit the location” (Pole & Morrison, 2003, p. 16). As well, ethnographic research is an inductive process of data analysis in which a theoretical examination of collected data is formulated by continually gleaning from it new ways of understanding emerging patterns (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Gérin-Lajoie, 2002; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). In the case of my study, data was gathered “through participant observation in relevant settings . . . open-ended interviews designed to understand people’s perspectives” together with the analysis of documents (Hammersley, 2006, p. 4).

An ethnographic approach allowed me to understand pedagogical practices and perspectives within each school as I observed classes as well as conducted informal and formal interviews with participants (Gérin-Lajoie, 2002; Gordon et al., 2002; Pole & Morrison, 2003).
Ethnographic research was integral for examining what knowledge was engaged with and how in classrooms among teachers and students. It was likewise instrumental for uncovering how teachers made sense of the teaching and learning dynamics in their classrooms (Gérin-Lajoie, 2002). Teachers’ perspectives on curriculum, knowledge, and pedagogy afforded me insight into how and why certain knowledge was engaged with. Thus, in agreement with Apple (2004):

The researcher needs to “live” in classrooms, to see the complex forms of interaction that occur in classrooms. In this way, more accurate pictures can be got of which particular “kinds” of students “get” what particular kinds of knowledge and dispositions. . . . Furthermore, one can see how knowledge is actually created and used in school settings.

(p. 15)

**Ethnographic Case Studies**

Comparative education research has historically been marked by a tradition of macro-level analysis focusing on the structural realm of policy, school governance and organization, and the official curriculum (Broadfoot, 2000; Crossley & Vulliamy, 1984). However, in recent decades and heeded by scholars such as Masemann (1976) and Broadfoot (2000), comparative education has witnessed a shift to micro-level research relying on ethnographic studies to understand schooling processes and classroom realities, including individuals’ practices and perspectives. A popular tactic for doing so has been the use of a small number of cases. This is called a case study. Like ethnography, case studies stem from different research traditions and convey assorted meanings (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1984; Hammersley, 1992). Nevertheless, characteristics common to case study research include an in-depth investigation of a small number of naturally occurring situations, examination of phenomena over time in one setting,
detailed description of events at this site, concern with representing participants’ perspectives, and a focus on portraying the complexity of events and perspectives (Hammersley, 1992; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995; Merriam, 1988).

As with all forms of educational research methodology, ethnographic case studies have limitations and advantages. One potential shortcoming is low population validity, that is, the degree of generalisability of findings to other populations (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1984). Another critique of case studies has been their focus on practices inside schools without taking into account the broader context in which they are situated. Third, a researcher’s bias may influence data collection and analysis. In this vein, Stenhouse (1979) elaborated that “any description . . . rests upon the judgement of him who observes and describes, both in respect of what he selects as worthy of notice and in respect of interpretative perception” (p. 8).

Yet case studies are useful for a host of reasons, particularly for ethnographic research in schools (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). For one and, in response to the generalisability criticism, Spindler (as cited in Crossley and Vulliamy, 1984) maintains:

An in-depth study that gives accurate knowledge of one setting not markedly dissimilar from other relevant settings is likely to be generalisable in substantial degree to those other settings. . . . It is better to have in-depth, accurate knowledge of one setting than superficial and possibly skewed or misleading information about isolated relationships in many settings. (p. 8)

Secondly, case studies may deal with micro to macro-level domains as opposed to being restricted to the former. A case could be an individual, an event or situation, an institution such as a school, a national society, or international system (Hammersley, 1992).
Also, due to their concern with the “complexities of educational practice,” ethnographic case studies enable researchers to discern pedagogical patterns over a long period of time (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1984, p. 204). In contrast to brief school visits or the sole utilization of questionnaires or surveys for data collection, this longitudinal element of case study research allows researchers to “delve below the surface of the ‘official’ version of the process of innovation” (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1984, p. 199). Stenhouse (1979) similarly argued that case studies in comparative education research are essential for understanding schooling as they better represent “day-to-day educational reality” (p. 10). This rationale is prominent given that “what goes on within schools is by no means clearly understood” (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1984, p. 197), together with the view that teachers represent the “core of education” (Niyozov, 2008 p. 133).

Ethnographic case study research at the classroom level also permits researchers to note gulfs between rhetoric about ideal practices and the actual practices. That is, between what is espoused in official discourse and policy texts about what ought to be happening in classrooms, and the reality of what occurs (Ball, 1994; Crossley & Vulliamy, 1984). Crossley & Vulliamy (1984) state:

Through their concern with the everyday practices of teachers and students, case-study methods are well placed to identify important constraints on innovation, which may not be apparent to policy-makers who necessarily lack a detailed understanding of the local context in which innovations are being attempted. (p. 179)

Halting analysis of curriculum at the policy or document level can provide a misleading portrait of actual practice as studies reveal (Bjork, 2003; Gvirtz & Beech, 2004; Osei, 2010). This policy–practice bridge is also important when taking into account an historical trend mentioned
by Crossley and Vulliamy (1984). “Comparisons between schooling in different countries are
almost exclusively conducted in terms of educational *policies* and only rarely . . . are questions
raised as to the relationship of such policies to the realities of schooling” (p. 197).

This facet of ethnographic research is particularly noteworthy considering the under-
researched impacts of decentralization and centralization policies on curriculum practices in
explains the import of seeking the perspectives of those expected to put “policy into practice”:

The overwhelming majority of studies of educational decentralization focus on the
actions of government officials and policy makers. . . . Those perspectives may provide
insight into the process of policy formation and the exercise of power at upper levels, but
they often neglect to consider the vital role that individuals working at the ground level
play in policy implementation. . . . The ethnographic approach underlines the importance
of considering local perspectives when making assessments and policy decisions about
decentralization measures. Interviews and observations conducted in actual school
settings call into question many of the conclusions articulated in official documents, field
reports, and public statements made by government officials. (p. 185)

**Multilevel Analysis**

My research is a multilevel analysis spanning policy and the official and enacted
curriculum. This is a key distinction as comparative ethnographic case study research can also be
“among levels whereby local, national, and international understandings of an educational matter
are analyzed vertically (from one level to the next)” (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006, p. 100). Multilevel
inquiries yield a more “balanced understanding” of the complexities of educational practice
A multilevel analysis is also indispensable for comprehending the global–local interplay of transnational forces, national education policies, official national and municipal curricula, and the enacted curriculum (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006). This speaks to a central rationale of comparative and international education research noted by Hayhoe and Mundy: making sense of the “link between local practices and global issues” (2008, p. 1). Other scholars also write about this (Arnove, 2003; Broadfoot, 2000; Crossley, 2000; Marginson & Mollis, 2002; Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006). Thus, while the enacted curriculum is not necessarily determined by international forces and education policies, an examination of such factors is necessary for understanding curriculum knowledge dynamics.

Sub-national Comparison

Case studies do not preclude comparative analysis. They can in fact comprise horizontal comparisons across research sites. My research is a sub-national comparative ethnographic case study that examines curriculum knowledge both vertically across levels and horizontally across two municipal public elementary schools. This entailed extended analysis of schools situated in particular milieu to understand “the degree to which certain phenomena are present in a given group or how they vary across cases” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 241). The comparative element was useful for juxtaposing not only the conceptualization of knowledge in the official curriculum, but also the knowledge–pedagogy dynamics of the enacted curriculum in schools in Bahia and Piauí. It also unmasked contextual factors that shaped similarities and differences across two research sites in Brazil’s Northeast, a point that parallels Kubow and Fossum’s (2003) argument for comparative research.

My study not only addresses a gap in comparative studies of regional areas in
“developing” countries, it aims to go beyond summative national comparisons in fostering greater cognizance of the intricacies within sub-national contexts and schooling (Fry & Kempner, 1996). Comparative education research has historically been defined by a tradition of cross-national comparisons (Bray & Thomas, 1995; Broadfoot, 2000). A drawback of such research is that “broad generalizations obscure the features that distinguish one region, school, or pupil from another” (Bray & Thomas, 1995, p. 487). Cross-national studies may not capture local particulars in heterogeneous sub-national contexts. In addition, “comparison of states or provinces is especially important in countries with high degrees of decentralization to the state/provincial level” (Bray & Thomas, 1995, p. 479). The same could be argued for decentralization to the municipal and school level. It is therefore misleading to speak of the education system of a country in places like Brazil where greater control over schooling and curriculum (purportedly) resides with municipalities and schools (Bray & Thomas, 1995). Furthermore, “by decentering the West and the North, by refocusing our attention on those areas that have been historically neglected,” educators can become more cognizant of how such dynamics “are formed in the contexts of histories and power relations that may be strikingly different from those we are used to focusing on” (Apple, 2003, p. 4).

A final point about a comparative international study such as mine is that it presents cross-cultural research challenges and benefits. As I discovered being a foreigner to the nation in which my study was conducted as well as relatively unfamiliar with the sub-national context, cross-cultural research requires engaging with different perspectives and assumptions about topics relevant to one’s research. This may involve confrontation with conflicting views of the research endeavor such as participant–researcher relations and related ethical matters. This can
create tensions yet also challenge researchers to clarify their understanding of their roles and investigation. Additionally, it can help researchers become more cognizant of and sensitive to participants’ standpoints and expectations. These aspects are part of “the essence of ethnography” in attempting to “understand people’s perspectives from the inside while also viewing them and their behaviour more distantly, in ways that may be alien (and perhaps even objectionable) to them” (Hammersley, 2006, p. 11).

3.3 Data Collection Techniques

I collected data through document analyses, observations, and interviews. I regarded these techniques as crucial for analyzing knowledge in the official curriculum as well as examining how and why certain knowledge is engaged with in the enacted curriculum of each school. In this section I draw on scholarly educational research literature to define, explain, and justify the use of each technique. I begin with document analysis since it was the first technique utilized, helped me understand the classification and framing of knowledge in the official curriculum, and served as a springboard for subsequently investigating the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy realm of the enacted curriculum.

Document Analysis

Although there is a wide range of semantic interpretation surrounding documents in educational research, I use the term to refer to institutionally produced (either government or school) materials. In this sense, I recognize documents as socially created products that perform a range of social and political functions (Prior, 2003). They are resources of written language that facilitate a better understanding of historically situated contexts (Esterberg, 2002).
Document analysis is more than just scrutiny of content. In addition to being the least intrusive of the three data collection techniques in ethnography, document analysis enables researchers to gain insight into particular phenomena (Merriam, 2002). Documents yield an official historical record of a context in that they disclose how patterns have evolved and why. As well, documents provide points of reference to map against human subjectivity. For example, curriculum documents may outline characteristics that parallel or contradict what teachers and students actually do in classrooms. However, since the drawbacks of relying solely on document analysis include the lack of insider perspectives and the fact that meanings change over time (Esterberg, 2002), interaction with participants is also essential in ethnography.

Observations

Observations afford such direct interaction. Observation involves collecting data by “watching and listening to what people naturally do and say” in particular settings and “experiencing and sharing the same everyday life as those under study” (Brewer, 2000, p. 59). It requires “looking in a focused way” and represents a planned and recorded system that is continually checked and reviewed by researchers (Esterberg, 2002; Merriam, 1988).

Observation is integral to ethnographic research for a number of reasons. It is useful for gaining a firsthand perspective of what others experience and documenting behavior while it is happening (Esterberg, 2002). Classroom observations also reveal patterns of teaching and learning practices (Esterberg, 2002). In addition, observations can serve as reference points for interview questions and/or responses as well as bring to light topics or situations participants may not be willing to discuss during interviews (Merriam, 1988).
A challenge of collecting data via observation is for the researcher to maintain a balance between being both an insider and outsider, a member and a nonmember, and an observer and participant who is able to gather information by noticing yet simultaneously critically reflect on what has been observed (Brewer, 2000). Such challenges are more complex given the observer-observed stances a researcher may take. These include complete observer, complete participant, participant as observer, and observer-as-participant (Merriam, 1988). In order to both gain an inside perspective yet also be able to investigate, experience, and represent complex practices in classrooms (Emerson et al., 2002), taking an observer-as-participant stance is particularly effective. In a classroom setting this means sitting among students yet focusing on observing rather than orally participating in the lesson (Merriam, 1988).

Regardless of their advantages, observations are subjective recordings of practice limited to the researcher’s perspectives (Angrosino, 2005; Pole & Morrison, 2003). As I’ve learned from observing and being observed across diverse contexts, observations do not lead to fully understanding pedagogical practices. “To rely on observation without also talking with people in order to understand their perspectives is to risk misinterpreting their actions” (Hammersley, 1992, pp. 11-12). What’s more, “teachers’ explanations of their practice may differ considerably from those of the external observer” (Niyozov, 2008, p. 137). The task of social observers is to forage into these perspectives and attempt to “understand the multiple ways in which individuals perceive reality” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 80). For these reasons, observations are often supplemented with interviews in ethnographic research (Pole & Morrison, 2003).
Interviews

Interviews have become increasingly common in recent decades as research techniques in a variety of fields for gaining information from and understanding the perspectives of others (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). In ethnography, interviews are contextually situated face-to-face encounters that use verbal stimuli to elicit verbal responses from participants (Brewer, 2000). Both interviewers’ and respondents’ perspectives and experiences shape the discourse and meanings negotiated and interpreted in the interview (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003).

My research relied on semi-structured individual and group interviews. Semi-structured interviews begin with predetermined guiding questions, yet they permit flexibility for further inquiries into respondents’ elaborations and are largely shaped by participants’ responses (Gérin-Lajoie, 2002). In contrast to individual interviews, group interviews allow researchers to elicit responses from various participants at one time. Group interviews are also more dialogical in that participants respond to one another. This enables participants to “share and make use of narrative material from a broader range of discursive environments than any single one of them might muster to account for his or her experience alone” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, p. 45).

Individual and group interviews are useful for understanding reasons for classroom practices, including the contexts and histories behind them. Such awareness is critical for becoming mindful of how teachers make sense of how they teach and why. Examining teachers’ perspectives can also potentially expose unexplored theories regarding what takes place in classrooms and why.
3.4 Empirical Study

My research used these techniques to address the following question: What are the knowledge dynamics spanning the official and enacted curriculum in two municipal public elementary schools in Salvador, Bahia and Teresina, Piauí in the Northeast of Brazil? Four sub-questions guided my investigation:

1. How is knowledge classified and framed in the official national and municipal curriculum?
2. What knowledge is engaged with in the enacted curriculum?
3. How is such knowledge engaged with and why?
4. What are pedagogic staff’s perspectives on curriculum knowledge and pedagogy?

Sites & Timeframe

My research took place over the course of one academic year in two municipal public elementary schools in Brazil’s Northeast. I spent the first semester of the academic year from mid-February to late July 2008 at Sabiá (school) in Salvador, Bahia. Sabiá, a fictitious name, is a municipal public elementary school with an approximate enrollment of 1,500 first to fifth-year students. Sabiá is located in a sprawling yet densely populated neighborhood I’ve renamed Sol. Sabiá was founded by Sol residents who voiced their need for a public school for children of Sol.

The morning session pedagogic staff at Sabiá included a principal, vice-principal, and 16 full-time female teachers. These teachers taught first to fifth-year math, Portuguese, history, geography, and science to one group of students each morning session for one academic year. Each group of students had another teacher for art, dance, and physical education classes. The fifth-year students also had an English class once a week. Most of these teachers taught morning and afternoon sessions for a total of 40 hours per week, while a few also taught night classes.
I spent the second semester at Tucano (school) in Teresina, Piauí from early August to late November 2008. At Tucano, another pseudonym, my data collection ended three weeks earlier than anticipated as the primary participant, the focus teacher, took a leave of absence in late November due to an urgent family health matter. Tucano is a municipal public elementary school for approximately 700 first to fifth-year students. It is the only municipal public elementary school in the expansive and populous neighborhood that I’ve renamed Triunfo. Like Sabiá, Tucano opened through a petition by the local Neighborhood Association of Residents to the Teresina municipal government.

The morning session pedagogic staff of Tucano included a principal, two pedagogic coordinators, and 12 first to fifth-year teachers, only one of who was male. As with Sabiá, the majority of the teachers at Tucano taught both a morning and afternoon session. A few also worked at night and at other schools. The pedagogic coordinators divided their work among year levels. The one responsible for collaborating with fourth and fifth-year teachers was more experienced and was the participant in my research. These coordinators also facilitated teacher collaboration, observed less experienced teachers, and held regular meetings with teachers about their planning, students’ performance, tests, and students’ progression (or not) to the next cycle. For instance, the two fifth-year morning session teachers at Tucano created their own school tests, but one of the coordinators reviewed these. Similarly, the pedagogic coordinators discussed with teachers which students should pass the fifth year and proceed to the sixth year at another school. This decision was based on the average of students’ math and Portuguese school test scores over the four bimesters (two bimesters per semester) and their reading and writing performance throughout the year.
Municipal public elementary schools were chosen as research sites given that they were reported to use contextually relevant curricula, yet in accordance with official national curriculum guidelines (Gomes et al., 2000). Comparing curriculum knowledge dynamics across two municipal schools in different states allowed me to record similarities and differences, including what knowledge was legitimized, as well as how and why such was engaged with in the enacted curriculum. Investigation of the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy nexus across the official and enacted curriculum in each context also permitted me to juxtapose contextually shaped knowledge dynamics such as the connection between curriculum and community realities in two contexts in the region.

Carrying out research throughout the entirety of a semester in different schools enabled me to document both initial encounters at the beginning of the school year between students and teachers at Sabiá and more concretely forged relations among teachers and students who had already spent three semesters together in the case of Tucano in Teresina. I anticipated that the first semester in Salvador might unveil how the focus teacher and students establish roles and relations that would set the stage for how they co-construct the classroom reality. Conversely, I thought the second semester in Teresina might yield greater insight into how knowledge curriculum dynamics are influenced by pressures such as end-of-year testing.

My rationale for choosing schools in Salvador and Teresina differed. My selection of Salvador was partially based on my familiarity with the city stemming from three months I spent there in 2001 designing and teaching a course for my MA Practicum. I also had personal contacts that facilitated my initial communication with Sabiá. I chose Teresina for three reasons. First, the semester in Salvador overlapped with the second semester in many municipal systems in the
Northeast. Teresina was one city where I had sufficient time to invite a school to participate, recruit participants, and commence data collection at the beginning of the second semester. Second, I assumed that the municipal curriculum of Teresina might be more localized given that it is the least touristy capital city in the region. Third, my interest was piqued by citizenship projects carried out by municipal schools as publicized on the Teresina Municipal Secretary of Education (SEMEC) and city web sites, together with the fact that Teresina has been ranked as the best municipal elementary school system in the Northeast.

Gaining Access to Each Site

With regard to gaining access to each site, written permission was first obtained from the University of Toronto Ethics Review Office. The subsequent steps varied between the two sites. For Sabiá in Salvador, a “School Invitation Letter” and “School Participation Consent Form” were sent to the principal together with “Information Letters” and “Consent Forms” for potential participants. These letters were written in Portuguese and stated the nature, scope, and length of my research. They included mention of how data would be collected and used, the implications for participants, and that the purpose of the study was not to evaluate administrative or pedagogical practices but rather to understand municipal school curriculum knowledge in the region. After Sabiá agreed to participate in my study, the principal took my correspondence to the Salvador Municipal Secretary of Education (SMEC) for written authorization. She then sent this signed authorization along with the signed participation consent form back to me so I could obtain a research visa to enter and remain in Brazil for the duration of my data collection.

The process of gaining access to Tucano worked differently. After the completion of the semester at Sabiá, I traveled to Teresina where a personal contact introduced me to a SEMEC
employee. I informed this employee of my research and inquired into the proper protocol for seeking authorization to conduct my research at a municipal elementary school in the city. She arranged a meeting with the Head Superintendent for municipal public elementary schools the following day. During the meeting with the Head Superintendent, I summarized my proposed research and addressed her questions about my research methodology, school criteria, participants’ roles, and other aspects. She then stated that I needed SEMEC’s written authorization prior to inviting any schools to participate in the study. As requested, I provided SEMEC with a copy of the aforementioned invitation, information, and consent forms and letters. After my research was approved by SEMEC the following day, the Head Superintendent contacted several schools that partially met my criteria: She was unable to identify a school with six fourth and fifth-year morning session teachers. One school, Tucano, expressed an interest in meeting me and learning more about my research in order to decide whether they would like to participate. The Head Superintendent arranged for me to visit that school on August 4, 2008. I discussed my research with the Tucano principal and pedagogic coordinators, gave them a “School Invitation Letter” and “School Participation Consent Form,” answered their questions, and obtained the school’s written consent to participate. I returned the next day to address all teachers and recruit potential participants through information sessions.

Participants

My research involved seven female participants at Sabiá and six female participants at Tucano. In line with the S and T names for the schools and neighborhoods in Salvador and Teresina respectively, I chose common Brazilian pseudonyms for all participants to protect their identity: S names for Salvador staff and T names for Teresina staff. At Sabiá, there was one
primary participant or focus teacher named Simone, the principal whose name was Samara, and five fourth and fifth-year morning session teachers: Sara, Silvia, Solana, Sofia, and Sonia. The pedagogic coordinator left the school early in the semester and before any data was collected from her participation. In Teresina, participants included the focus teacher Tânia, Teresa the principal, a pedagogic coordinator Tiessa, and three fourth and fifth-year morning session teachers named Telma, Tatiana, and Thais.

Samara, Teresa, and Tiessa were invited to participate as one of the objectives of my study was to understand both teachers’ and administrators’ perspectives of curriculum knowledge and pedagogy. The fourth and fifth-year morning session teachers were invited to participate given my desire to understand teachers’ perspectives on and practices with respect to curriculum knowledge and pedagogy in the second cycle (fourth and fifth years) of municipal elementary schooling in the Northeast of Brazil. Also, as opposed to afternoon and evening session teachers who typically teach older fourth and fifth-year students, my intention was to focus on more traditional classes of 9 to 11-year-olds. All fifth-year morning session teachers were invited to participate as the one focus teacher at each school. The focus teacher was the primary participant of the study at each school since I was most interested in understanding the characteristics of enacted curriculum knowledge in the final year of the second cycle of elementary school. The reason for this interest in the fifth year is that it represents a traditionally exclusionary stage of public schooling in Brazil regarding who progresses to middle school. I welcomed any fifth-year morning session teacher to be the focus teacher at each school. However, if two or more fifth-year teachers had volunteered for this role, I would have selected the teacher with more teaching experience at that level given that he/she might have had more to say about how she/he teaches
and why in relation to curriculum knowledge. Needless to say, only one fifth-year teacher volunteered in each context.

These participants, none of whom I had met prior to my study, were invited to participate through letters sent or, in the case of Teresina, given to the school. As indicated in these letters, I gave two information sessions to potential participants before the start of the semester in which the study took place at each school. The first information session was attended by all teachers at each school. This session gave them and all potential participants an opportunity to hear the study explained and ask any questions in order to, in the case of potential participants, decide whether they would like to participate. I also offered to have a meeting with the fifth-year morning session teacher(s) who expressed an interest in participating as the focus teacher. As only one fifth-year morning session teacher volunteered to participate in each site, however, I had a series of informal conversations with each to further explain the study and answer questions regarding her potential participation and my contact with her throughout the semester.

Two clarifications need to be mentioned concerning the information sessions. First, the information sessions in Salvador took place several days after I had been interacting with school staff. Samara thought it was crucial that I first develop rapport with and be accepted by teachers before formally presenting my research to them. She therefore invited me to spend three days with school pedagogic staff before the beginning of the semester. During this time I attended a planning session, the central objective of which was for the school to decide curriculum objectives for the year and elaborate relevant teaching plans. Second, during each initial information session I emphasized to potential participants that I did not view their written consent as just a signature, rather as a relationship founded upon mutual respect (R. Gaztambide-
Fernández, personal communication, 2007). I also reiterated all key points from the invitation and information letters and consent forms such as of the nature and intentions of the research, that participation was voluntary, that there were no foreseen negative consequences, and that they could withdraw from my study at any time (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). As well, I gave potential participants and other staff the opportunity to address any uncertainties and/or concerns. I considered these meetings vital since, in the Northeast of Brazil, face-to-face interaction is considered as the only way to formalize relationships and establish trust and rapport.

**Curriculum Differences Across the Sites**

Five noteworthy differences between Sabiá and Tucano exemplify municipal and school curricula variations across municipalities. Two contrasts were in relation to the pedagogical support for teachers and contributions from volunteers. Although Sabiá benefitted from a contingent of male volunteers that tutored students in the computer room and helped the administration as needed, there was only a pedagogic coordinator for the first three weeks of my research. SMEC asked all such coordinators in the municipal system to work in a central office as opposed to in schools. In contrast, Tucano teachers had two pedagogic coordinators who provided guidance for teachers as previously noted.

Another distinction was the pedagogical and curricular organization of knowledge areas. At Sabiá, the fourth and fifth-year teachers were responsible for teaching all curriculum knowledge areas to one group of students each during the morning session. While the same was true for the first to third-year teachers at Tucano, the four fourth and fifth-year morning session teachers taught certain knowledge areas to all students of each grade level. For instance, Tânia
taught math and science to two groups of fifth-year students. She had one group on Tuesdays and
Thursdays and the other on Wednesdays and Fridays. She generally taught the same content on
consecutive days to these two groups of students. Tiessa cited the difficulty for one teacher to be
able to teach all content, and the belief that teachers should teach what they are more familiar
with as justifications for this organization. Also, whereas Simone in Salvador taught her group of
students for the first time in 2008, the fifth-year teachers in Teresina were teaching the same
students they taught as fourth-year students in 2007. The semester I observed marked the fourth
consecutive semester that Tânia had been with the same students. The Tucano teachers and
administration felt such a system led to greater continuity in the enacted curriculum. Moreover,
while Sabiá teachers taught Monday through Friday, each Tucano teacher had one day off from
teaching each week for lesson planning or professional development purposes. For instance,
Tânia took a course on how to enhance students’ literacy skills. On her day off, another teacher
focused on improving students’ reading and writing abilities.

A final prominent difference across research sites was that, unlike Sabiá teachers, all
Tucano teachers had a copy of the Teresina municipal curriculum as well as consulted a
compilation of model lesson plans called a *fluxo* as necessary. With respect to the former, the
focus of the second semester for fifth-year students was on exploring more deeply what they
learned in the first semester. For example, Tânia said that students studied percentages in the first
semester and that they would continue doing so in the second semester only with slightly more
complicated tasks. As Tiessa clarified, the fluxo was created by municipal system teachers and
pedagogic coordinators and was designed to serve as an optional reference and orientation,
particularly for less experienced teachers.
Document Analysis

I relied on Bernstein’s (1971) concepts of classification and framing for an analysis of knowledge in the National Curriculum Parameters (PCNs) and the municipal curriculum guidelines of Salvador, Bahia and Teresina, Piauí. My focus was on what were formerly called the first through fourth grades of elementary schooling. More specifically, it centered on the second cycle and the third and fourth grades, what are now known as the fourth and fifth years.

The analysis of the PCNs involved six steps. I first examined the structural organization of the 10 volumes that comprise “knowledge areas” or “transversal themes”: (a) Introduction of the National Curriculum Parameters, (b) Portuguese, (c) Mathematics, (d) Natural Sciences, (e) History, (f) Geography, (g) Art and Physical Education, (h) Presentation of the Transversal Themes and Ethics, (i) Environment and Health, and (j) Cultural Plurality and Sexual Orientation. Second, I read each volume and highlighted and annotated any mention of knowledge. Third, I decided to limit my focus to four volumes: (a) Volume 1 (Introduction of the PCNs), (b) Volume 3 (Mathematics), (c) Volume 8 (Presentation of the Transversal Themes), and (d) Volume 9 (Transversal Theme of the Environment). I regarded Volume 1 fundamental for comprehending the conceptualization of knowledge that underpins other volumes. I chose Volume 3 because math is considered one of the two most important knowledge areas in public schooling. As well, math has historically been taught as disconnected from students’ lives and other curriculum knowledge areas (Brasil, 1997b). Also, as it turned out, math was only one of two knowledge areas taught by the focus teacher in each school. I selected Volume 8 in order to understand the conceptualization of transversal themes that are to permeate the curriculum. I analyzed Volume 9 since the theme of environment was also selected as the focus of the
municipal curriculum of Salvador. Fourth, I reread the volumes as well as revisited the highlighted, annotated portions. Fifth, I coded them to identify thematic patterns and make sense of the data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Finally, I referred to Sleeter and Stillman’s (2005) research on the California Curriculum Frameworks and Standards as an example of how Bernstein’s framework has been used for examining the classification and framing of official curriculum knowledge.

The procedures for analyzing the municipal curriculum guidelines in Salvador and Teresina were more straightforward. They entailed examining the structures of and reading each city’s curriculum documents, highlighting and annotating mention of knowledge, and coding.

Although I did not analyze the classification and framing of knowledge in the pedagogic or curriculum proposal of each school, I examined them to better understand how each site conceptualized the relation between curriculum, knowledge, and pedagogy. I briefly mention these in Chapter 5. As well, I looked at in-class materials such as handouts and tests. I translated all document citations quoted in subsequent chapters.

These analyses, which I detail in Chapter 6, revealed what is conceptualized as valid knowledge in the official curriculum and how it is organized (Apple, 2003; Bernstein, 1971; Sleeter & Stillman, 2005). They also enabled me to understand how the organization and treatment of knowledge in the official curriculum related to what knowledge was engaged with, and how and why it was done so, in the enacted curriculum in each context.

Observations

At each school I relied on classroom observations of the focus teacher’s fifth-year classes as well as attended staff meetings as an observer-as-participant throughout each semester. In
Salvador, I observed 79 of Simone’s fifth-year classes during the first semester of the academic year. These observations totaled more than 300 hours of my presence in her classroom. For the second semester in Teresina, I observed 45 of Tânia’s fifth-year classes for approximately 175 hours. During these observations I took extensive handwritten notes. I began with a wide perspective and noted a range of descriptive information in each context. I only took more focused observation notes once I had begun to discern patterns in each context. I typed up my observation notes on a daily basis at home as well as added class summaries and additional reflections. I also translated all teacher and student comments inserted in my dissertation.

The observations were central to addressing two of the study’s objectives of understanding classroom knowledge dynamics: what knowledge is engaged with in the enacted curriculum and how such knowledge is engaged with. Observations over the course of a semester in each context allowed me to note and compare phenomena at the beginning, middle, and end of the term through an inductive data analysis. Thus, rather than limiting the foci of the observations to my preconceived assumptions and conceptual categories, the observations were open-ended. Through the observations I was able to document what counted as legitimate knowledge in classrooms along with how such knowledge was engaged with.

The classroom observations also played an important role in relation to document analysis and interviews, not to mention the comparative element of my study. The observations offered a point of comparison with conceptualizations of the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy linkage outlined in curriculum documents. As well, they provided springboards for interview questions yet also led to revealing juxtapositions with teachers’ perspectives of in-class
dynamics. Additionally, observations allowed me to note similarities and differences in how pedagogical practices varied for different knowledge areas within and across research sites.

Staff meetings afforded me opportunities to hear participants’ reflections on the official and enacted curriculum in each site. These meetings covered a range of topics such as students’ reading and writing abilities, school pedagogic projects and the integration of themes into the curriculum, the impact of contextual realities of students’ lives on the curriculum, and mention of municipal system pressures. These meetings served as informative landscapes in between the official and enacted curriculum as they expanded my consciousness of how teachers and administrators collectively shaped the curriculum. Such awareness proved helpful for comprehending the support for or constraints to certain pedagogical practices and embedded classroom knowledge dynamics.

Interviews

At each school I used semi-structured individual interviews with the focus teacher, principal and, in Teresina, the pedagogic coordinator. There was also one semi-structured group interview with all participating fourth and fifth-year teachers, one of whom was the focus teacher in each context. Overall, these interviews sought to understand how these participants made sense of curriculum knowledge and how their conceptualizations related to classroom pedagogy. Documenting their perspectives at different stages of the respective semesters was useful for comparing patterns in their views with observation data.

Individual interviews with the focus teacher in each school took place on three occasions throughout the respective terms. The primary aim of these interviews was to uncover how these teachers made sense of the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy nexus. Three formally arranged
interviews were deemed necessary to address three sub-themes: (a) how they conceptualize the curriculum, knowledge, and curriculum knowledge; (b) how they relate such conceptualizations to how they describe their pedagogical practices; and (c) how they justify or explain these practices. Also, questions concerning observed classroom patterns or their comments were occasionally raised in interviews in relation to these sub-themes.

The individual interviews with Samara, Teresa, and Tiessa took place after several weeks in each context. This delay was requested by staff in both schools given their heavy workloads during the outset of the semester. These interviews focused on ascertaining general characteristics of each school as well as how these participants perceived the relations among knowledge, curriculum, and pedagogy. Their perspectives yielded insight into school curriculum characteristics and views of what they thought should be happening in classrooms and why. They also mentioned an array of factors influencing the curriculum. Overall their discourse enlightened me to complexities between curriculum, pedagogy, contexts, and policies.

Lastly, one group interview with five fourth and fifth-year teachers in Salvador (one was absent) and with the four fourth and fifth-year teachers in Teresina in the middle of each respective semester focused on understanding teachers’ perspectives on knowledge, curriculum, and pedagogy across these year levels and contexts. These group interviews provided a range of data that supplemented participants’ responses during individual interviews. Namely, they uncovered similarities and contrasts among teachers’ views at the different schools.

All interviews were conducted in Portuguese by me and took place in a convenient on-site location and time for the participant(s). Before each interview I reiterated points mentioned in the consent forms about the interviews being an opportunity for me to hear their perspectives
on how they make sense of their teaching and, in the case of the group interview, for them to share with one another. The length of the interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes for the individual interviews and 60 to 90 minutes for the group interviews. Interviews were recorded with a digital audio recorder and subsequently transcribed. As with all data, this information was stored in a password-protected electronic file. I translated all quotations used in this dissertation.

As anticipated, the interviews helped me understand how pedagogic staff made sense of and justified certain pedagogical practices. What I did not expect was having to revise planned research questions. That is to say, while I went into the first individual interviews and the group interviews with the same questions I prepared for my ethical review, I found that the second and third interviews with each focus teacher entailed a lengthy process of reviewing collected data and modifying pre-planned questions. I adapted questions for these interviews after reviewing my observation notes, listening again to previous interviews, and rereading my subsequently explained research journal. Consequently, I rethought the initial interview guideline questions, some of which had either been addressed or were no longer ideal.

Informal Interviews

In addition to formal interviews, I engaged in daily school-related discussions with participants at each site and was repeatedly encouraged to ask questions. The resulting informal interviews included solicited and unsolicited information. These conversations gave me further insight into how teachers and pedagogic staff viewed a variety of issues related to education policy, and the official and enacted curriculum. Comments touched on a range of topics and factors that impacted the curriculum in each context as I describe in Chapters 7 and 8.
**Research Journal**

I also kept a daily research journal in both sites. This journal included reflections, data collected through the informal interviews, school descriptions, aspects that surprised me such as the expected researcher–participant relations, points about the school contexts and realities, and any thoughts and questions that surfaced regarding the curriculum. Keeping a journal proved invaluable as it disciplined me to document phenomena that I would have likely forgotten to mention if I hadn’t been keeping, reviewing, and adding to written notes on a daily basis. This journal also stimulated me to think of further questions for inquiry in relation to curriculum knowledge dynamics in each context.

**Data Analysis**

As evidenced by my research journal, my data analysis was simultaneous with my data collection (Delamont, 2002; Merriam, 2002). Such overlap permitted me to inductively map emerging patterns as well as make necessary adjustments to effectively manage and examine large quantities of data (Merriam, 2002). Therefore, in addition to transcribing recorded interviews and writing field notes during observations as a way of making sense of what was observed (Esterberg, 2002), “interacting with and thinking about the data” via a process of analysis known as coding was also essential (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 30).

Coding entails continually revisiting and organizing data into more manageable groups, identifying themes, and gleaning new ways of thinking about and understanding meanings and relationships in the data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). My coding involved three levels to tease out a range of broad to specific categories. Each day at home I typed up my observation notes and used specific, descriptive level one codes to make sense of
what happened in each classroom each day. Such codes were made up of a few words to describe various stages of each observed class. In addition, I wrote a descriptive summary of each observation as well as my own reflection and analytical commentary at the end. While I was careful not to let these analytical memos interfere with descriptive coding, they were instructive for my analysis. They helped me refine subsequent observations, particularly later in the semester in each context. At approximately the midway point in each semester I regrouped the descriptive codes into categories. That is, I initiated level two coding by examining the initial descriptive coding and identifying emerging conceptual categories. This was also the stage at which I revisited my codes and notes in order to comprehend findings from my data. Finally and, after all data had been collected at each site, these conceptual categories allowed me to perceive patterns or themes. These themes became the third level of coding.

These coding steps were cyclical and imprecise rather than a rigid, linear process. This is partly due to the fact that I worked within a comparative analysis mode. For example, during the second semester of data collection in Teresina, I went back and forth between data collected from both sites to make sense of findings. This included revisiting my observation notes in both contexts as well as writing down additional notes and insight gained (Delamont, 2002). Also, the sheer quantity of data and research timeframe made for a lengthy data analysis process.

Factors Influencing Data Collection

A multitude of unexpected factors impacted my data collection throughout my fieldwork in both contexts. In Salvador and, as noted above, the pedagogic coordinator left the school in March so I did not conduct an individual interview with her. With regard to Teresina, I only observed 45 classes in contrast to the 79 I sat in on in Salvador. This was due to several reasons.
First, my observations ended on November 25th since Tânia took a leave of absence. While we were able to arrange a final individual interview before her departure, observations were cut short by three weeks. Additionally, she only taught four days a week whereas Simone in Salvador taught five. Teacher strikes also reduced my data collection in both contexts. In Salvador a citywide strike over issues ranging from salary to working conditions and lack of health insurance lasted for several days in April. Another teacher strike occurred in September while I was in Teresina.

Researcher–participant relations also had an impact on my informal data collection in each school. I was viewed as a colleague and confidant by staff in each context. I was also expected to be more integrated into school life and behave more casually than I anticipated. In each context I had coffee, snacks, and lunch with teachers and other staff on a regular basis. In Salvador I had conversations with teachers and staff in the school kitchen every morning over coffee and/or breakfast. I even made coffee on a number of occasions for staff. I also had lunch twice a week in Salvador with Samara and the vice-principal in Samara’s office. I likewise ate lunch several times a week with a few teachers and Teresa in Teresina during part of the semester, as well as had coffee and engaged in small talk with teachers before classes and during a break each morning in the teachers’ room.

My participation extended beyond these regular gatherings in each context. One example was that I was invited to sit in on other teachers’ classes. I did not take notes during these occasions but did assist as requested. I was also invited to attend a meeting at Sabiá with neighborhood residents who addressed community issues and, in Teresina, observe a parents’ meeting about literacy. What’s more, I was asked to speak to various groups of students in
Salvador and take part in a school skit. The former included afternoon and evening classes. For
the skit I participated with about 15 other staff in a series of rehearsals and two performances in
front of all students in an annual school São João (Saint John) festival performance. Samara regarded all this as a return benefit to the school.

The researcher–participant relations transcended school borders in both Salvador and Teresina. I was invited to staff birthday parties, homes, an MA defense, and weekend social activities. I was also led on a neighborhood tour. Whenever I declined, as was the case for a shopping mall trip with Tucano students and staff given that my appearance would have compromised the school’s identity, staff and students expressed disappointment.

Altogether these experiences illustrate the tension between my role and objectives as a researcher, maintaining predefined ethical boundaries, and my relations with participants and other staff. They helped me gain a better appreciation of the degree to which context influences researcher–participant relations as well as for the challenges as an ethnographer and cultural outsider. They also provided informal data collection opportunities. I believe such opportunities resulted in greater understanding of municipal school curricula than I would have derived from only formal methods of data collection.

3.5 Conclusion

My comparative ethnographic case study of municipal school curricula knowledge dynamics in Brazil’s Northeast drew on critical educators’ perspectives of the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy web as a conceptual framework through which to make sense of patterns that emerged from an inductive analysis of data collected via document analyses, observations, and interviews. My research methodology allowed me to focus primarily on the enacted
curriculum in investigating my research questions. Through doing so my study addressed gaps in comparative education research on how official school curricula are enacted as well as on school curriculum knowledge. Yet the scope of my inquiry also covered the domain of education policy and the official curriculum. The comparison across two schools in different cities and states within a sub-national region revealed the contextually situated interplay of numerous influences on this policy–curriculum span. Chapter 4 details the significance of the urban periphery realities of my research contexts in this regard.
Chapter 4 – Research Context: The Urban Periphery in Brazil’s Northeast

This chapter describes historical, political, socioeconomic, and geographic features of Brazil, its Northeast region, and urban periphery realities. The chapter opens with hallmark aspects of Brazilian society. It then focuses on the Northeast and the urban periphery contexts of my research. This contextual backdrop of the macro-level milieu of my research sites is essential to depict since “education can only be fully understood in terms of the context in which it is taking place” (Broadfoot, as cited in Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006, p. 96).

4.1 Brazil: An Introduction

Occupying nearly half of South America and spanning almost 8 million square kilometers, Brazil is the fifth largest country in the world (IBGE, 2007). Brazil is also the fifth most populous nation, home to approximately 190 million inhabitants (IBGE, 2007). Within its borders lie the largest tropical rainforest, wetland and reservoir of freshwater, and the most biodiversity on the planet (Thomas, 2006). Regarding economic growth, Brazil is considered one of the 10 largest world economies. Politically speaking, Brazil has experienced waves of democratic and authoritarian regimes since becoming a federal republic in 1822. With a return to democratic rule in 1985 and, reinforced with the Constitution of 1988, Brazil is now recognized as the world’s third largest democracy behind India and the United States (Selcher, 1998). Brazil is also regarded as one of the most politically decentralized nations in the world and certainly Latin America (Borges, 2008; Thomas, 2006). This point is revisited in Chapter 5 when addressing education policy in Brazil.
Figure 1, Political Map of Brazil (IBGE, 2009a)
Heterogeneous Heritage

Perhaps more so than any nation, the miscegenation among indigenous, European, African, Asian, and Middle Eastern peoples has been foundational to Brazil’s heterogeneous heritage. This diversity stems in part from waves of immigration from, primarily, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Northeast Asia over the past century that have dramatically reconfigured Brazil’s demographic landscape. Long before the arrival of these immigrants and the Portuguese colonizers in the early 16th century, however, millions of indigenous peoples inhabited the land. Today an estimated several hundred thousand indigenous peoples belonging to approximately 200 tribes reside in Brazil (Rocha, 1997). Anywhere from 180 to 220 indigenous languages are spoken. Brazilian Portuguese, while the national official language, has been profoundly influenced by scores of indigenous and African languages (Geipel, 1993).

The contributions of indigenous peoples rival those of African descent in the shaping of Brazilian society, yet the African heritage is arguably the single most distinguishing trademark throughout the country. This is particularly so in the contexts of my research in the Northeast region. “From the colony’s very infancy in the early 16th century, the contribution of Africa to the population and development of Brazil has been prodigious and pervasive and few aspects of Brazilian society and civilization have remained untouched by it” (Geipel, 1997, p. 18). Myriad impacts of Brazil’s African heritage and traditions on religious, culinary, and other facets of society can be noted today (Geipel, 1997). I offer a few examples in the next section.

This African stamp on Brazilian society was imprinted by an infamous legacy of slavery. More African slaves were forced to Brazil than anywhere in the Western Hemisphere over four centuries in the Atlantic slave trade. Historians estimate that 30 to 40% of the 9 to 15 million
slaves shipped to the colonies in the Americas were destined for Brazil (Geipel, 1997). Though slavery was officially abolished in 1888, it “laid the foundation for economic inequality and exploitation, and influenced the way institutions, groups, and classes developed after abolition” (Rocha, 1997, p. 7). It also persists as a clandestine practice (SMEC, 2005).

**Land of Contrasts**

Above all, however, Brazil is a “land of startling contradictions” (Arons, 2004, p. 3). It is a “country of extremes, a nation of contrasts” (Thomas, 2006, p. 10). Nowhere are these contrasts more evident than in the striking inequalities and regional disparities. Though the middle class now constitutes a majority, intertwined social and economic inequality still shackles a large portion of the populace (Lemos & Nunes, 2005; Wright & Wolford, 2003). With 30% of Brazilians living on less than one half of a minimum salary per capita, Brazil has marked social stratification and one of the most unequal distributions of wealth in the world (Arons, 2004; IBGE, 2008; Kempner & Jurema, 2002; Lemos & Nunes, 2005; Thomas, 2006; Wright & Wolford, 2003). In 2000 Brazil had the world’s second most unequal income distribution, trailing only Swaziland (Lemos & Nunes, 2005). The poorest half of the population receives one tenth of the national income while the richest 10% earns nearly 50% (Arons, 2004). Such injustices are interlinked with an array of conditions like crime, violence and environmental degradation, inequities and inequalities in education, access to health care, social services and political processes, as well as centuries of slavery, exploitation, and exclusion (Brasil, 1997c; Moraes, 2003; Thomas, 2006; Wright & Wolford, 2003).

These issues are rooted in unequal land ownership beginning with the allocation of 14 tracts of land called *capitãrias* to 12 Portuguese nobles in the early 16th century. These friends
of the Portuguese crown were granted extensive taxation, governance, and land distribution powers in ruling over these territories that were far greater in size than America’s 13 colonies. Thus, “inequality was introduced into the very core of what would become Brazilian society, economy and politics” (Wright & Wolford, 2003, p. 113). Wright and Wolford expand on this:

The historic and continuing control of the land by a very small minority of landowners has led to systematic, rapacious exploitation of the poor. . . . The pattern of unequal land ownership has been the foundation for the growth of stark inequities in income, social status, education, health care, social services, participation in community affairs and access to the courts. After five centuries of dominance over people and institutions, landowners have learned that they can often operate as a law unto themselves, literally committing murder with impunity and undoing reform efforts time and time again. (2003, p. xv)

These inequalities are spread throughout Brazil, yet stark demographic, geographic, and socioeconomic differences extend across its five regions. The temperate Sul (South) with the states of Paraná, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul, and the sub-tropical Sudeste (Southeast), represented by São Paulo, Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro, and Espírito Santo claim the highest socioeconomic standards of living in Brazil (IBGE, 2008). The Southeast is Brazil’s most densely populated and most populous region with over 42% of the country’s residents (IBGE, 2008). It also serves as the nation’s chief economic engine and as the “effective center of national life” (IBGE, 2008; Selcher, 1998, p. 30). In fact, the economy of the city of São Paulo alone is larger than every Latin American nation except Mexico (Thomas, 2006). The tropical Norte (North) encircling Tocantins, Pará, Amapá, Roraima, Amazônia, Rondônia, and Acre is Brazil’s
largest, most sparsely populated, and second poorest region (IBGE, 2008). It is known for the largest river system in the world: the Amazon River Basin. The Centro-Oeste (Central-West) region of Mato Grosso do Sul, Mato Grosso, Goiás, and the Distrito Federal or Brasília harbors the world’s biggest wetland and a savannah containing the greatest range of flora of any on the planet (Thomas, 2006). The soy, cattle, and corn/ethanol industries of the North and Central-West also lie at the center of the debate on economic growth, poverty alleviation, land ownership, and ecological protection (Thomas, 2006). These regions are highlighted below.

Figure 2, Brazil’s Regions (IBGE, 2009b)
4.2 Brazil’s Northeast

Perhaps more so than any region, the Northeast is most central to understanding Brazil (Fry & Kempner, 1996). Regarded as the “birthplace” of the nation where indigenous, European, and African elements first collided, the region has “shaped Brazilian culture and politics in ways that have persisted until the present day” (Wright & Wolford, 2003, p. xxiv). The Northeast comprises the states of Maranhão, Piauí, Ceará, Rio Grande do Norte, Paraíba, Pernambuco, Alagoas, Sergipe, and Bahia, spans nearly 20% of national territory, and has a population of 50 million (Araújo, 2004; IBGE, 2007). The following map shows its states and capitals.

Figure 3, Northeast Region: States & Capitals (IBGE, 2009c)
Since my first visit to the Northeast in 1995 to my more recent travels throughout its nine states, I’ve been taken by its landscapes and inhabitants. Though renowned for its thousands of kilometers of coastline, the region contains Atlantic rainforest habitat hugging much of its littoral, fertile coffee, cacao, and sugarcane zones further inland, and a vast semi-arid interior that is associated with some of the country’s most severe hardships yet which also has ostensibly shaped the industrious and carpe diem spirit of many Brazilians. The region is also home to ubiquitous festas (festivals) and an accompanying pleasure-seeking mindset. From the São João festivals that extend from April to July and around which school calendars are planned, the micaretas, micaroas and other pre-Carnival celebrations, to the festivals in honor of livestock, there is seemingly a festa for everything in the region. Yet it is the people’s hospitality and outlooks on life and relationships that have made the most indelible impression on me. On this note, the nine months of data collection in the region afforded lessons about human relations that challenged my own assumptions and shook my comfort levels. I offer these perspectives not to oversimplify or romanticize this complex, diverse region but rather to accentuate a few of the many positive elements of the contexts of my research. Such attributes are largely omitted from the predominate accounts of poverty, corruption, and violence in the subsequent descriptions.

The Construct & Significance of the Northeast

The Northeast reality is not a homogenous one but rather a hard-to-define, heterogeneous context. For one, although the regional map above reflects a geographic division, the Northeast is a political “invention” (Albuquerque, 2004). Accordingly, it is a region that has been defined and delimited in different ways in research (Andrade, 1980). The first recorded use of the name Nordeste (Northeast) occurred in 1909 with the federal government’s creation of the Inspetoria
de Obras contra as Secas (Agency of Works Against the Droughts) (Arons, 2004). The region’s present geographic boundaries were created in 1968 by the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE, or Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics).

Secondly, the Northeast comprises distinct micro-regions, each with unique geographic, climactic, economic, political, and social landscapes (Andrade, 1980; Araújo, 2004). The humid *zona da mata* (coastal forest zone) and its sugar cane and cocoa industries as in Bahia are a world apart from the cattle raising and cotton producing drier northern coastlines and inland transition zone called the *agreste*. These micro-regions are in turn contrasts with another Northeast, a “zone of transition” between the dry Northeast and the Amazon region that includes the states of Piauí and Maranhão (Araújo, 2004, p. 25). There is also the semi-arid, drought-stricken hinterland known as the *sertão*, which covers approximately 50% of the Northeast and is home to nearly 40% of its residents (Arons, 2004; Thomas, 2006). The sertão is perhaps the most infamous of Brazilian landscapes and one of the most written and sung about. It is the area most associated with connected dilemmas of grinding rural poverty, desertification, social, economic and political inequalities, and corruption.

As the heart of the slave trade and the sugar plantation economy, the Northeast was the most important political and economic region of Brazil during the early colonial period. The sugar plantation system was the juggernaut for staggering levels of African slave labor. At its peak, an estimated 40% of Brazil’s slaves were involved in sugarcane cultivation (Geipel, 1997). Largely owing to this plantation and slave-driven economy, until the drought of 1877 that displaced millions in the region, the Northeast was the “economic, cultural, religious, and political center of the country” (Arons, 2004, p. 29).
A fourth characteristic of the Northeast is that African influence has been the most profound in this region, far stronger than in the “Europeanized south and southeast of the country” (Pereira, 1999, p. 3). By the 17th century, people of diverse African lineage represented over two thirds of the region’s population (Geipel, 1997). In addition, in contrast with Anglo-America, African identities survived more intact in Brazil due to lesser degrees of forced tribal segregation (Geipel, 1997). These aspects together with what were once primarily runaway slave communities first referred to as mocambos and later called quilombos, many of which survive as communities of Afro-Brazilian heritage in the Northeast, continue to shape Brazilian popular culture and notions of citizenship (French, 2006). African influences are evidenced by cuisine like acarajé which means “come together” in Yoruba, the religions of candomblé, macumba, and umbanda, and centuries-old Afro-Brazilian song and dance forms such as samba-de-roda, maracatu, and capoeira.

Finally, although once at the heart of national prominence, the region has been regarded as a “peripheral area” on the fringes of Brazil’s political and economic ideological life (Selcher, 1998). This peripheral notion has been cultivated by elites in the region to justify the need for financial and other resources while “avoiding authentic regional reforms that would benefit the poor, restructure power, and therefore threaten their own privileged status” (Selcher, 1998, p. 32). Such historical trends in the Northeast along with subsequently described present-day issues there are connected to regional discrimination and a negative stigma of the region in the Brazilian consciousness (Beserra, 2004; Pereira, 1999; Wright & Wolford, 2003).
Social Issues in the Northeast

In spite of dynamic economic growth that rivaled or surpassed the national average in the past four to five decades, societal dilemmas such as poverty and inequality remain pervasive in the region. The Northeast is the poorest area of Brazil with the largest percentage of population under the poverty line of any region (IBGE, 2008). The Northeast is where nearly two thirds of the rural poor in Brazil reside (Wright & Wolford, 2003). As well, as of 2007 68% of youth in the region under the age of 17 were living below the poverty line (IBGE, 2008). It is not only home to the greatest socioeconomic inequality and stratification in the country, the Northeast contains the highest concentration of poverty in the Western Hemisphere and represents one of the largest gulls between rich and poor in the world (Arons, 2004; Fry & Kempner, 1996; Pereira, 1999). This is especially significant considering that the Northeast and Brazil are located in Latin America, the “most unequal region on the world in terms of wealth distribution” (Schugurensky, 2003, p. 50). Moreover, the Northeast is home to over half of all illiterate residents and the highest percentage of illiterate youth in Brazil (IBGE, 2008). Altogether then, the Northeast has the greatest concentration of Brazil’s socially excluded population (Lemos & Nunes, 2005; Wright & Wolford, 2003).

Exacerbating poverty, inequalities, and exclusion, there has been widespread political and socioeconomic manipulation and exploitation coupled with an extreme divide in land ownership and resource control in the Northeast dating back to the days of colonialism and slavery (Fry & Kempner, 1996; Pereira, 1999; Wright & Wolford, 2003). The Northeast is where “the foundations for inequality were laid from the earliest days of the Portuguese colony, through a long history of slavery and plantations producing for export” (Wright & Wolford, 2003, p. xxiv).
Two related phenomena that speak to these issues are coronelismo and clientelismo. The Northeast continues to be marked by coronelismo, or the prevalence of dominant landowners (Pereira, 1999). In fact, unequal land ownership is a worsening social problem in the region and “remains one of the primary pillars of traditional socioeconomic and political power structures in the area” (Araújo, 2004, p. 25). Large landowners have manipulated the intentionally overly complex land registration process, and they have monopolized access to credit and repeatedly redefined and avoided tax obligations and loan repayments (Pereira, 1999). Clientelismo or clientelism is a related trend that has shaped Brazil, in particular the Northeast. It is a system of personal politics in which politicians “build personal support through the exchange of favors and the dispensation of patronage to clients” (Plank, 1990, p. 539).

An example of the coalescence of coronelismo and clientelismo is the indústria da seca or drought industry. The drought industry can be summarized as rich politicians’ and landowners’ control of resources for their own benefit. This has included misdirection into their own pockets of national and international public funds intended for the poor who have suffered from droughts (Wright & Wolford, 2003). It has also extended to votes, agriculture, and other resources. “Food that is intended for drought relief tends to be exchanged for votes, and wells that are dug most often benefit the wealthy who need water to plant, but not to survive” (Wright & Wolford, 2003, p. 121). Therefore, while a shortage of water and other resources have long been blamed as causes of hunger, death, poverty and migration to the region’s urban centers, the ongoing problem in the Northeast is the manipulation and unequal allocation of resources together with the persistence of “traditional, clientelistic, paternalistic, and corrupt politics” (Arons, 2004; Selcher, 1998, p. 32; Wright & Wolford, 2003).
Urban Periphery

The aforementioned inequalities and exploitation practices together with Brazil’s industrial economic growth have caused dramatic urbanization throughout the country in recent decades (Araújo, 2004; Wright & Wolford, 2003). Over the past 50 years, Brazil has transitioned from two-thirds rural to predominantly an urban society (Wright & Wolford, 2003). Today, approximately 85% of Brazil’s inhabitants reside in urban areas and nearly 30% live in cities with populations exceeding 500,000 (IBGE, 2008). Andrade (1980) bridges the connections between this urbanization, rural poverty, and previously cited dilemmas:

The agrarian problem is one of the most serious the country has, because of the great concentration of land ownership and the low level of utilization by the large and medium property owners. A majority of the rural population receives very low wages, which practically puts them outside the consumer market. This helps account for the tremendous degree of rural poverty and the high rate of migration from the country to the city, provoking a disorderly growth of the cities and the marginalization of great numbers of people. The phenomena of unemployment, underemployment, lack of food, and poor sanitary conditions have created an urban problem. (pp. 1-2)

Thus poverty, once primarily a rural phenomenon in the Northeast, has increasingly shifted to urban contexts (Thomas, 2006). This urbanization has negatively impacted the quality of life for many in large cities in the Northeast and elsewhere in Brazil (Lemos & Nunes, 2005).

As land legally designated for construction and business is limited to a “restricted circle of those who possess resources and legally own properties,” the only places open for settlement among these migrating poor have often been in the “precarious areas of the periphery” (Rolnik,
In what Rolnik (2008, p. 24) terms an “exclusionary development model,” many periphery residents did and still do not have legal claims to land or basic conditions enjoyed by the minority. Rolnik (2008) elaborates on the link between urban inequality, marginalization, and what she calls “sociopolitical territorial fragmentation”:

In a city divided between a rich, legal and well infra-structured portion and a poor, illegal, and precarious sector, the population in the unfavorable situation end up having very little access to the economic and cultural opportunities that the urban environment offers. (p. 25)

Not surprisingly then, the largest population increases have occurred in the periferia, socioeconomically lower-class neighborhoods often on the edge of city limits (Araújo, 2004; Lemos & Nunes, 2005; Maricato, 2000; Secco & Squeff, 2001; Serpa, 2002; A. M. Soares, 2006). Communities of the periferia, sometimes referred to as favelas (slums), reflect high socioeconomic inequality and urban poverty (A. M. Soares, 2006). They are densely populated areas inhabited by low-income, predominantly black residents (Serpa, 2002; A. M. Soares, 2006). As well, they are frequently sites of land invasions, are typically regarded as illegal, and are commonly areas with the gravest social, economic, and environmental conditions in cities (Secco & Squeff, 2001; Serpa, 2002). Periferia neighborhoods may lack state institutional services such as garbage collection, hospitals, banks, and public transportation (Secco & Squeff, 2001; Serpa, 2002; Sol residents, personal communication, 2008). As an online key word search under “periferia” in newspapers such as the Diário do Nordeste reveals, these areas are also mostly associated in the media with violence, crime, drugs, and unemployment (also see Secco & Squeff, 2001).
Societal exclusion is acknowledged as a primary challenge facing the periphery (Jacobs, 2002; A. M. Soares, 2006). These residents “confront not just environmental injustice but the absence of full social and political inclusion” (Jacobs, 2002, p. 62). The struggle for social and political inclusion and influence is a common theme in municipal election campaigns such as one in Teresina in 2008 with the slogan “A Periferia Tem Vez!” (The Periphery Stands a Chance!), hip hop and rap music that addresses life in such areas, and in language like marginal, which can refer to someone who engages in criminal acts as well as to “people perceived as outside the boundaries of human society” (K. Butler, 1998, p. 171).

On a positive note, these neighborhoods demonstrate strong community solidarity and political activism. Both are epitomized by neighborhood associations and movements that struggle for more just and democratic existences and participation in municipal life (Serpa, 2002; A. M. Soares, 2006). One example is the Federação das Associações de Bairro de Salvador (FABS, or Federation of Neighborhood Associations of Salvador). FABS has existed for several decades and has presented an influential voice in fighting on behalf of the periferia in Salvador (Serpa, 2002). It has lobbied for municipal government and public support for the construction of schools and health centers in periphery neighborhoods (Serpa, 2002). Such struggles for better conditions in the periferia are reflective of the “diversity of cultural practices and strategies created for the survival of the population” where the “collective identity of its residents . . . is expressed through their culture and socioeconomic condition” (A. M. Soares, 2006).

The construct of the periferia is notable to my research for a few reasons. In addition to being in a region that has been regarded as peripheral to national importance, my research sites are located in urban periphery areas. Moura Castro claims that the urban periphery reflects the
worst of Brazilian education and is where “all the problems of drugs, marginality, crimes and demoralized schools” can be found (2007, para. 2). With regard to my focus on curriculum knowledge, the urban periphery constitutes students’ daily realities and therefore shapes the intertwined experiences and knowledge they bring to class. In this vein, participants in both contexts stressed the importance of contextualizing the curriculum in relation to violence and other realities of students’ lives. Lastly, the notion of periphery offers a metaphor for making sense of what knowledge is excluded from or subjugated in the curriculum.

4.3 Salvador, Bahia & Teresina, Piauí

Salvador, Bahia

Bahia, the largest and most populous state in the Northeast with 14 million inhabitants (IBGE, 2007), was the site of the European “discovery” of Brazil in 1500. Bahia is the state to which more African slaves were forced to go than to America (Fry & Kempner, 1996). As a result, “what began as one of the New World’s most nefarious plantation economies . . . is today a Mecca of African culture in the diaspora” (K. Butler, 1998, p. 159).

Bahia’s capital city of Salvador, the first capital of Brazil, has a population of nearly 3 million (IBGE, 2007). As the main port city during the early colonial period, it was the gateway for the transatlantic slave trade in Brazil and the departure point for slaves relocated to work on plantations and mines. Today Salvador is the Afro-Brazilian demographic and cultural center of both Bahia and Brazil (Fry & Kempner, 1996). Afro-Brazilian roots feature in many sectors of society, from religion and popular culture to economics and politics (Kraay, 1998).

Linked with the legacy of slavery going back to the 16th century, Bahia is still described as an “exclusionary and discriminatory society” in which Afro-Brazilians struggle for social and
political legitimacy (K. Butler, 1998, p. 159). Nowhere is this more evident than in its capital city of Salvador. Salvador “exemplifies the contradictions of Brazil’s late-twentieth-century economic development” with booming industries contrasting with “large tracts of grinding poverty” (Kraay, 1998, p. 8). An estimated 70% of Salvador residents live in favelas, the periferia, or in similar contexts (Cintra & Martins, 2008). Out of 88 urban areas, the three neighborhoods with the lowest numbers of “non black” residents reported an average income of over R$ 3,000, or approximately C$ 1,700. In contrast, an urban periphery neighborhood registered an average income around R$ 200, which equates to roughly C$ 110 (SMEC, 2005). Some therefore argue there are two cities in Salvador, a legal one with a strong state institutional presence and an illegal one largely ignored by authorities (Cintra & Martins, 2008).

Though regarded as the “capital of happiness” and one of the most beautiful cities in Brazil, Salvador is also one of the most violent. In the first five months of 2008 alone, 926 murders were registered there (Filho & Torreão, 2008). Much of this violence and crime such as a series of mass killings that occurred in June 2008, including one in the neighborhood of my research site, is attributed to gangs and drugs (Nascimento & Cirino, 2008).

Research Site 1: Sol

The neighborhood where my research took place in Salvador, Sol, is what Samara called a “marginalized” community. It is home to approximately 70,000 residents (Sol residents, personal communication, 2008). Sol was created in the 1980s as a result of one of the largest “illegal” land invasions in Brazil’s history (Sol residents, personal communication, 2008). In its early years, Sol was a site of police and government repression: Municipal and state police repeatedly razed homes and attempted to evict and remove residents (Sol residents, personal
Today Sol is marked by a derogatory portrayal in the media and evident in the views of city residents. Several participants remarked that it is considered one of the most violent areas of the city. This violence is a regular reality for its residents, as well as influences the curriculum of Sabiá. To cite examples, during the first week of the first semester of 2008 Samara received a death threat from the wife of a drug dealer because there was no vacancy in the morning session for her son. The next week a gunfight between rival gangs broke out around the school and everyone was sent home. One gang informed Sabiá staff that they planned to use the school as a strategic vista point. In May a student’s father killed a resident by setting him on fire. The following day a student in class commented that he too would resort to killing or robbing if he didn’t pass the fifth year. Two weeks later the body of the uncle of a fourth-year student was found behind the school. He had been killed over a drug dispute. At the end of the semester a gang-related “massacre” claimed the lives of residents, including two former students of Sabiá. So, in spite of the lure of a higher salary some teachers choose not to work at Sabiá (Samara, personal communication, 2008).

Underneath this veil of negative publicity, Sol is characterized by an ongoing struggle for justice. In fact, “resistance” is used as a definitive word to summarize its history. Such resistance has included disputes with police and the city government for the right to occupy land, as well as more recent struggles over sewage, sanitation, health, and other services. For instance, many residents continue to live in illegal domiciles as they have yet to secure officially recognized property ownership and registration rights (Sol resident, personal communication, 2008).

Another point of contention residents have shared with city officials is the minimal state
institutional presence as evidenced by the absence of any bank, hospital and, until 2008, city bus route (Sol residents, personal communication, 2008).

Such struggles have cemented a community solidarity as I learned during a meeting with community residents and in a walking tour of Sol. At both the meeting and on the street, a common point of discussion was strategies for improving life in the neighborhood. Aspects ranged from public transportation and infrastructure to health and education issues. Similarly, the neighborhood is now home to a score of social projects such as a revolutionary recycling program, approximately 25 cultural groups such as music bands, as well as numerous not-for-profit organizations.

Teresina, Piauí

Piauí is unique among Northeast states. It is considered the poorest state in Brazil and has one of the lowest populations in the Northeast (IBGE, 2007). In terms of historical roots and, in contrast to Bahia, Piauí was “one of the last regions to be colonized, the first to exterminate the native populations and is currently the locale where the vestiges of the oldest settlement in the Americas can be found” (Dias, 2003, p. 216). With respect to geography, it is the only state in the Northeast with its capital located inland, commonly referred to as the interior (Dias, 2003). Piauí is also situated in a transitional zone between the semi-arid caatinga (thorny white shrub-like vegetation) micro-region of the sertão and the humid Amazonian climate of the Meio Norte or Middle North (Dias, 2003). This characteristic partially explains Piauí residents’ perception of their state and themselves as distinct from other residents of the Northeast. As with elsewhere in the Northeast, however, Piauí continues to be subjected by extreme droughts and resource issues.
For example, in 2008 local media reported that over 300,000 state inhabitants suffered from food and water shortages.

Piauí also stands out for the extent it remains on the periphery of national understanding. While the Northeast has long been considered a poorly understood region in Brazil (Andrade, 1980), Piauí is one of the least researched and understood states in the nation (Dias, 2003). “Neither facts nor historical cultural traditions gain notoriety outside its borders” (Said, 2003, p. 351). Piauí was even left off a national map used in school textbooks (Dias, 2003; Said, 2003). Accordingly, it has been difficult to dispel the notion of Piauí as a socioeconomically impoverished area of little importance to the rest of Brazil (Dias, 2003; Said, 2003). This image surfaced in my conversations with Salvador residents who called Piauí “the end of the world.”

Just as Piauí contrasts with other northeastern states, Teresina differs from Salvador and other capital cities of the Northeast. Teresina has experienced dynamic urban growth in recent decades and now accounts for more than one third of the state’s population, nearly 800,000 residents. Nonetheless, it is deemed one of the least known capitals of Brazil and, given that it is the only Northeast capital not located on the coast, attracts the fewest tourists of any capital in the region. Despite its lack of notoriety, the city is a national pioneer in certain respects. Teresina is the first planned capital of Brazil. Its development influenced other planned capitals in the country such as Palmas in Tocantins and Brasília. As well, the expansive collective community gardening or horta concept that designates land throughout the city on which low-income residents can grow, consume, and sell organic crops started in Teresina and is spreading to other cities (Teresina residents, personal communication, 2008).
Research Site 2: Triunfo

In spite of these distinguishing aspects, the context of my research in Teresina was similar to Sol in Salvador. Tucano is located in a sprawling periphery neighborhood, which I’ve renamed Triunfo. Triunfo is home to approximately 60,000 residents (Teresa, personal communication, 2008). Triunfo includes an illegally occupied area that dramatically increased Tucano’s enrollment in 2008 (Teresa, personal communication, 2008). Also, as participants mentioned, Triunfo is regarded as one of the most “violent” and “dangerous” neighborhoods in Teresina with prevalent crime and drug issues. Many former students of Tucano have been killed or become involved with drugs and gangs there (Teresa, personal communication, 2008). In contrast with several years ago, however, Teresa said that violence has diminished.

4.4 Conclusion

The above-described facets of Brazilian society portray national contrasts within Brazil as well as situate my sub-national, comparative ethnographic research in urban periphery realities in its Northeast region. This contextual backdrop allows for more in-depth understanding of how education policy and schooling are rooted in social, historical contexts (Fry & Kempner, 1996). This is particularly important in Latin America where education is shouldered with enormous responsibility in that it is seen as a “remedy for social ills such as poverty, growing inequality, violence” (Henales & Edwards, 2002, p. 123). The following chapter offers an overview of public primary schooling and education policies in Brazil. The latter have been touted as strategies in response to some of the above-mentioned issues.
Chapter 5 – Public Primary Schooling & Education Policy in Brazil

Public primary schooling in Northeast Brazil cannot be understood in isolation from the issues addressed in the previous chapter nor education policies that are formulated and implemented in response to such problems. This chapter begins with an overview of and challenges facing public primary schooling in Brazil. It then examines the “hybrid” facets of public schooling there (Fischman et al., 2003; Gandin, 2007). The third section depicts primary criticisms of education policies in Brazil. These polemics are instructive for investigating the relation between policy and the official and enacted curriculum across national, municipal, and school levels.

5.1 Public Primary Schooling

Governance & Organization of Public Schooling

Basic education in Brazil comprises preschool, elementary and middle school which are collectively referred to as ensino fundamental, and high school or ensino médio. The 1988 Constitution of Brazil envisions basic education as a means for reducing aforementioned inequalities and regional disparities, educating for citizenship, and contributing to national development (Gomes et al., 2000). Responsibility for basic education falls to municipalities or states. However, Brazil’s education system is governed and organized collaboratively across a combination of federal, state, and municipal levels (Gadotti, 1997; Sarmento, 2005). Also, as noted later in this chapter, public elementary schools are increasingly joining municipal systems, which are accountable to federal policy initiatives. Thus, educational governance in Brazil in recent decades has been marked by centralized control coupled with elements of decentralized flexibility (Gadotti, 1997; Gandin & Apple, 2002).
Ensino fundamental or primary schooling is mandatory and free for all students attending public state and municipal schools. It consists of 200 school days a year, has recently transitioned from eight to nine years of schooling, and is intended for youth aged 6 to 14. Since the transition to nine years was not mandatory until 2010, at the time of my research only 28% of ensino fundamental students in the country were enrolled in schools where the nine-year system had been implemented (IBGE, 2008).

Where the nine-year organization has been put into effect as was the case at my research sites, schooling is organized into two stages. The first stage represents the first five years of schooling and can be equated with elementary school in the United States or Canada. The second stage is equivalent to middle school. Each stage is divided into cycles and years. The first cycle of elementary school typically comprises the first three years, formerly called séries or grades. The second cycle of the first stage generally comprises the fourth and fifth years. This second cycle was the focus of my research.

An additional characteristic of municipal elementary schools is that students attend school for four hours each weekday. Schools with large student enrollments have both morning and afternoon sessions. At these schools one group of fifth-year students for instance will only take classes in the mornings whereas another group will only attend the afternoon session.

Challenges Facing Public Schooling

Brazil has witnessed considerable public education improvements in recent years. Most notable are the quantitative gains in access to schooling and school enrollment. Brazil now reports near universal access to primary schooling (IBGE, 2008). Over 97% of all youth aged 7 to 14 are in school (IBGE, 2008). While educational expansion to provide access to the vast
majority has been the “trademark of Brazilian education” (Oliveira, 2004, p. 41), exclusionary characteristics and other problems are rife.

Brazil’s education system remains highly segmented according to socioeconomic background and geography (F. Soares, 2004). The nearly 90% of students who attend state or municipal schools are almost entirely from socioeconomically poor families and neighborhoods (Marcondes, 1999; Oliveira, 2004; Schwartzman, 2004; F. Soares, 2004; Valente & Arelaro, 2002). These public schools are overwhelmingly located in neighborhoods where poverty, drugs, and violence constitute students’ daily realities and impact schooling. For example, a municipal school principal in the periphery of São Paulo recounts how she negotiated with criminals in order to get students to stay in school as well as had students hand in weapons upon arriving at school each day (Martins, 2009). Similar urban periphery contexts such as Sol make it difficult to attract teachers to public schools in these locales as Samara told me. Schooling in Brazil therefore “continues to maintain privileges and barriers which stem from unequal income distribution” (Gadotti, 1997, p. 135).

The Brazilian education system is likewise marked by inequity and quality disparity. Not only are private schools purported to be of better quality than public schools (Oliveira, 2004; Schwartzman, 2004). The majority of children in public schools do not learn to read and write nor perform math problems at desired levels (Oliveira, 2004; Schwartzman, 2004). 2005 results from the national exam for Portuguese and math, the Sistema Nacional de Avaliação Básica (SAEB, or National Exam for Basic Education), revealed that 61% of students in what was then the fourth grade were unable to identify the main ideas of a simple text and that 65% of the same students struggled with basic addition, multiplication, subtraction, and division problems
These results sync with the observation that the average Brazilian student completes elementary school without fundamental math or text interpretation skills (Aranha & Buscato, 2008). Oliveira (2004) thereby claims, “No state or municipal system of education in Brazil can offer evidence that it offers education of minimum quality to the majority of its students in any way” (p. 54). Public schooling there is regarded as undemocratic and exclusionary as the majority of the population doesn’t have access to an education of quality (Gadotti, 1997; Oliveira, 2004; Schwartzman, 2004; Valente & Arelaro, 2002).

Moreover, what appear to be impressive enrollment figures are misleading. An estimated 660,000 primary school age youth are out of school (Guimarães, 2008). On top of this, only 72% of students are enrolled in and are regularly attending school while the remaining 28% registered as enrolled don’t attend on a consistent basis (Guimarães, 2008). These stats are reflected in the reality of Sabiá in Salvador where there was a waiting list of over 20 students for fourth-year classes (Samara, personal communication, 2008). Gandin (2007) notes:

The problem is that the improvement in the enrollment numbers per se guarantees neither better opportunities in terms of jobs (because there is no guarantee that the students who entered schools will stay there) nor an education that can contribute to changing the immense inequality in Brazil. When you add more students to a system that disrespects the culture of the student and sees him or her simply as another individual who can be ‘trained’ in the basic abilities necessary to the world of paid work, you create another problem rather than solving the original one. Who guarantees that these students will not drop out of school as they historically have been doing in Brazil? (p. 186)
There also continues to be an “educational pyramid of schooling in Brazil” (Oliveira, 2004, p. 44). On average Brazilian youth spend less than five years in school (Bencini & Minami, 2006). It has been reported that approximately 58% of students progress to the ninth and final year of primary schooling (Guimarães, 2008), yet only 3 out of 10 students complete this ninth year (Aranha, Cotes, & Azevedo, 2007). This pyramid only becomes steeper the higher the educational level. In 2006 just over 10% of students who had begun elementary school enrolled in tertiary education (Bencini & Minami, 2006). Students from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds generally only have access to the less prestigious yet costly private universities, whereas the more prestigious and free public universities overwhelmingly serve the elite (McCowan, 2007; Schwartzman, 2004). Consequently, some argue that the education system has failed to rectify socioeconomic inequality and educational inequity for the majority (McCowan, 2007; Oliveira, 2004; Schwartzman, 2004).

Age to grade level distortion, connected with failure/repetition rates, also remains a problem in ensino fundamental. In the mid-1990s, over 80% of what were then referred to as fourth-grade students were above the target age level for that year of schooling (Gadotti, 1997). This dilemma continues today as over 27% of students in primary schooling are above the target age of their respective year levels (IBGE, 2008).

Final points worth noting are the challenges facing public school elementary teachers in Brazil, 91% of whom are female (Aranha & Buscato, 2008). In terms of workload, more than one third of these teachers teach more than one session each day (Aranha & Buscato, 2008). That is, they teach in the morning, afternoon and/or evening for a total of 40 or more teaching hours per week. In addition, 20% of public school teachers work in more than one school (Aranha &
Buscato, 2008). Not surprisingly, teachers cite a lack of time to prepare classes and correct tests as one aspect that interferes with their pedagogy (Aranha & Buscato, 2008). As well, many public school teachers feel unprepared to deal with the reality of their classrooms (Gentile, 2007). Chapter 8 speaks directly to this.

**Public Schooling in the Northeast**

These issues are most pronounced in the Northeast. The Northeast has the lowest quality of public school education in Brazil as measured by the *Índice de Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica* (IDEB, or Index of the Development of Basic Education) (INEP, 2009). The IDEB conclusions are based on results from the *Prova Brasil* or Brazil Exam, a national examination for public primary schooling, the aforementioned SAEB exam used in both public and private primary and secondary schools, and the *Censo Escolar* or School Census, which reveals attendance and grade/year repetition figures. Eight of the 11 worst rated states in the nation are in the Northeast. Two of these are Bahia and Piauí. A correlation can be drawn between these results and research indicating that over 65% of youth aged 7 to 14 who were enrolled in schools yet who could not read or write resided in the Northeast (IBGE, 2008). This contrasts with roughly 4% of students in the Southeast (IBGE, 2008). Similarly, SAEB results from the late 1990s divulged that math and Portuguese language achievement levels of eighth graders in the Northeast were on par with fourth graders in the Southeast (Oliveira, 2004).

Age to grade/year level distortion and the pyramid of schooling also endure in the region. The Northeast tops the nation with more than 38% of primary school students who are at least two years of age over the target age group for their respective year levels (IBGE, 2008). With regard to my research focus of fifth-year classrooms, 42% of what were in 2007 called fourth-
grade students in the region were at least two years of age above their target age level (IBGE, 2008). In Piauí and Bahia, this figure climbs to 48.5% and 46% respectively (IBGE, 2008). In contrast, only 16% of students in this final year of public elementary school were two or more years above the target age group in the South of Brazil (IBGE, 2008). With respect to enrollment discrepancies between primary and secondary schooling, whereas approximately 94% of 7 to 14-year-olds were enrolled in the former in the Northeast in 2007, only 35% of 15 to 17-year-olds were enrolled in secondary schools in the region (IBGE, 2008). The latter figure compares with nearly 60% for the Southeast region (IBGE, 2008).

Salvador and Teresina face some of the above-described dilemmas. SMEC cites several issues confronting municipal schools in Salvador. One is the high failure and grade repetition rate. As of 2005 nearly 25% of students repeated at least one grade level (SMEC, 2005). Coupled with this, Salvador’s age to grade/year level distortion rate of 33% was recently the highest among large metropolitan regions in the country (SMEC, 2005). For instance, students’ ages ranged from 9 to 13 in the fifth-year class I observed at Sabiá. Further, about one third of these students ended up repeating the fifth year (Simone, personal communication, 2008).

Municipal school students and staff also experience “precarious” physical conditions and staff shortages (SMEC, 2005). As of 2005 the Salvador municipal school snack program, *Programa Municipal de Merenda Escolar*, only fed 60% of the students (SMEC, 2005). Sabiá also went without water for many days during the first semester of 2008. Staff shortages are another problem. SMEC reported a scarcity of 116 fifth to eighth-grade teachers, 227 vice-principals, and 656 pedagogic coordinators in 2005 (SMEC, 2005). This shortage continues: One group of students at Sabiá went over five weeks without a teacher in the first semester of 2008.
To further complicate matters and, as Samara shared with me, various school employees there did not receive salaries on time, some working months without pay. Additionally, there was a paucity of government-supplied pedagogical resources. Related to these conditions are annual teacher strikes or work stoppages called “paralyzations” such as one in April 2008 when municipal teachers demanded a salary increase, health benefits, and 31 other conditions (Sabiá staff, personal communication, 2008).

Teresina, though reportedly home to the best municipal elementary school system in the Northeast, faces challenges similar to Salvador. Three prime dilemmas are the disparity between age and year level, high failure rates, and the number of dropouts (PMT, 2003). For example, in 2000 age to year level distortion was over 30% for the first grade and nearly 53% in what was then the fourth grade (PMT, 2003). It should also be noted that all municipal schools are located in periphery contexts (SEMEC Superintendent, personal communication, 2008).

5.2 Educational Decentralization/Centralization

Educational decentralization/centralization is a “political process concerned with specifying who rules in particular settings” (Samoff, 2003b, p. 426). This process entails a distribution of authority among tiers of government, and between government and citizens (Karlsen, 2000; Lauglo, 1995; McGinn & Street, 1986). It involves shifting degrees of authority, autonomy, and accountability for educational financing, governance, and quality of provision from the central state to states or provinces, municipalities, and schools (Derqui, 2001; Zadja; 2004). Moves toward greater decentralization may include a delegation of functions and responsibilities to sub-national levels, which may or may not result in increased local authority and autonomy (Bray, 2003; Karlsen, 2000; Lauglo, 1995). Alternatively, in the case of devolution
local levels (allegedly) gain greater authority and autonomy over, for instance, curriculum (Bray, 2003; Karlsen, 2000).

In Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America several overlapping waves towards decentralization can be traced since the 1970s. Rather than decade specific, these trends reflect an ongoing connection between political, economic, and education policies and rationale. The central rationale for decentralization in the 1970s and 1980s in Latin America was principally financial due to the debt crisis in the region (Derqui, 2001). The World Bank and international agencies promoted decentralization on the premise that it would provide services and allocate resources more effectively and efficiently. “Large centralized bureaucracies were viewed as an impediment to effective service delivery and as an inefficient draw of resources” (Meade & Gershberg, 2008, p. 304). In terms of education, a focus since the 1970s in countries like Chile, Argentina, and Brazil has been on reducing costs of school provision (Derqui, 2001).

Neoliberal financial justifications for educational decentralization policies have coincided with democratization of government in Brazil. Political decentralization is linked with decades of military rule before 1985 and the Constitution of 1988, having since gained support “in the name of representation and participation” (Derqui, 2001; Selcher, 1998, p. 25). This post-military period together with Brazil’s Constitution emphasized greater political power to states and municipalities in relation to the federal government (Derqui, 2001; Selcher, 1998).

Decentralization has also been espoused for democratic governance and educational quality rationale in Brazil (Derqui, 2001). Decentralization has been “viewed as a bridge to bring the decisions closer to the problems” (Crespo, Soares, & Mello e Souza, 2000, p. 107). Doing so has been regarded as a panacea to universalize access to and correct inequalities of public
education (Azevedo, 2002; Schiefelbein, 2004). Decentralization at the municipal level has been complemented by more recent calls for greater school autonomy throughout Brazil since the late 1980s and, primarily in the 1990s (Derqui, 2001; Monfredini, 2002). Such autonomy is illustrated by the community-driven school governance models that have been implemented in some municipalities (Borges, 2008; Gandin, 2007; Gandin & Apple, 2002).

These models are also indicative of the sub-national variation of policies in states and municipalities across Brazil (Beech, 2009; Borges, 2008). They reflect how disparate forms of decentralization are connected with political party influence in different municipalities throughout the country (Borges, 2008). As Borges observes, more democratic practices such as the election of school principals by students, their parents, and teachers might be restricted in locales where deeply rooted “patron-client politics” persist. In contrast, the influence of the Workers’ Party, that of the present Lula Administration, in places such as Porto Alegre has resulted in greater municipal autonomy over curriculum (Gandin, 2007).

Notwithstanding such examples of the devolution of authority to municipalities, decentralization is not a stand-alone process. It has been accompanied by centralization measures. Since the 1990s Brazil has undergone a decentralization of financial, administrative, and curricular autonomy to municipal and school levels together with a centralization of national education plans, curriculum standards, evaluations, and rankings (Beech, 2009; Derqui, 2001; Gvirtz, 2002). As part of this, although municipalities and schools are granted greater autonomy on the one hand, on the other hand municipal and school administrations are held accountable for implementing policies and following guidelines conceived at the national level (Azevedo, 2002).

This concert of decentralization and centralization reflects neoliberal and non-neoliberal
elements. “Especially after 1995, federal educational authorities started to recognise that substantial improvements in basic education were urgently needed in order to upgrade Brazil’s economic competitiveness in the international arena” (Borges, 2008, p. 238). Various authors echo Borges’ point that, beginning in the 1990s, Brazil began to accommodate its basic education to economic growth and global market competition rationale (Canen & Grant, 1999; Derqui, 2001; Hypolito et al., 2009; Lopes & Macedo, 2003; Marcondes, 1999; Moraes, 2003; Wong & Balestino, 2003). Brazil began moving toward “competitiveness-driven and finance-driven reforms” and tailoring its education system more to global economic demand (Derqui, 2001; Wong & Balestino, 2003, p. 74). This is evidenced by the creation of centralized evaluations and curriculum standards perceived as necessary for raising Brazil’s global economic competitiveness (Lopes & Macedo, 2003). It is also exemplified by the notion that increasing public school enrollment would provide a stimulus to the economy (Kempner & Jurema, 2002). As well, neoliberal tendencies are reflected in the focus on reducing per-student spending (Wong & Balestino, 2003). Overall then, the emphasis on basic education has been “considered more appropriate for the assurance of a low cost, minimal education for the masses to attain economic stabilization” (Kempner & Jurema, 2002, p. 338).

Although neoliberalism is recognized as the “major thrust in educational policy in Brazil,” distinct historical phenomena have forged alternative spaces (Gandin, 2007, p 186). Gandin (2007) asserts that Brazilian education “must be understood not as a simple reproduction of a global trend in education, but as a hybrid process, with local characteristics and peculiarities” (p. 180). He points out that teachers’ unions and associations have mobilized for more democratic schooling along with better working conditions and wages during and since the
most recent military dictatorship from 1964 to 1985. Critical theory and, more specifically, critical pedagogy have also significantly influenced Brazilian public education since the 1960s (Lopes et al., 2006). In addition, the “need to integrate an immense number of children simply excluded from formal education” has prevented the implementation of a purely neoliberal agenda (Gandin, 2007, p. 187). Gandin explains:

Thus, when the federal government talks about devolution and decentralization, it does so by declaring its commitment to the historic struggles of the trade unions for democratic management in the schools. Therefore, at the same time that it achieves a neoliberal principle of decentralization, the federal government has to accede to a content that does not necessarily advance neoliberal principles which couple devolution and marketization. (2007, pp. 186-187)

Gandin (2007) expands on the combination of neoliberal and non-neoliberal principles driving education policy in Brazil. He reminds us of the federal government’s need to both maintain its legitimacy and its popularity among the populace by addressing issues affecting the majority. Speaking of the Fernando Henrique Cardoso Administration that was in office from 1995 through 2002 and the “lack of formal education among large portions of the population of school-age children,” Gandin notes that the “government invested in fundamental education to counterbalance its withdrawal from other social arenas and therefore ‘prove’ its commitment to the generation of equal opportunities for the larger society” (2007, p. 187). He continues concerning the Cardoso government’s need to improve its popularity:

Furthermore, in a country where urban violence only rises, and poverty menaces the stability of the society, formal education can also be seen as a form of ‘crowd control,’ a
means of removing children from the streets, a ramification which strongly stimulates the current investment in fundamental education. (p. 187)

His points parallel those of Samoff (2003b) who writes about similar roles of the state regarding public education in African countries.

I profile five salient examples of educational decentralization/centralization since the 1990s that are most relevant to my research on the curriculum and that showcase these hybrid characteristics of schooling in Brazil. These are the Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional (LDB, or Law of Guidelines and Foundations for National Education), national and municipal evaluations and ranking systems, the Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais (PCNs, or National Curriculum Parameters), the municipalization of school systems, and school decentralization/autonomy.

**LDB**

Curricular reform and the creation of high standards has been a foremost goal of the Brazilian Ministry of Education (MEC) (Moraes, 2003). The seed for recent curricular reform was planted at the 1990 Education for All Conference (EFA) in Jomtien, Thailand. EFA inspired the Brazilian Ministry of Education to develop the *Plano Decenal de Educação para Todos* (Ten Year Education Plan for All) (Frigotto & Ciavatta, 2003). This Plan aimed to integrate the public school system with centralized evaluations to establish “minimum curricular contents and standards for educational management” (Derqui, 2001, p. 571). It also affirmed “the necessity and obligation of the State to elaborate clear curriculum parameters capable of orienting mandatory public education in order to align such with democratic ideas and improve the quality of instruction in Brazilian schools” (Brasil, 1997a, p. 14).
This Plan was followed by the 1996 LDB. Regarded as the “Constitution of Education” in Brazil, the LDB addresses goals and objectives for all levels and types of formal schooling. The LDB is prominent for five reasons in terms of the policy–curriculum bridge. First, it states that all primary school curricula should have a common national core (Brasil, 1996). Second, the LDB elaborates the need for a diversified portion of the curriculum relevant to the needs of each locale (Brasil, 1996). In this sense, it calls for curricular autonomy at sub-national levels of states, municipalities, and schools (Gandin, 2007). The LDB also clarifies that schools are responsible for creating their own pedagogic proposals (Brasil, 1996; Gomes et al., 2000). Third, the LDB advocates federal responsibility of assessing students’ performance via national achievement tests and therefore concentrates significant centralized power in the Ministry of Education (Brasil, 1996; Derqui, 2001; Marcondes, 1999; Valente & Arelaro, 2002). Fourth, the LDB mentions the alternative of organizing schooling into cycles (Brasil, 1996; Valente & Arelaro, 2002). Fifth, it addresses the concept of devolving responsibility for primary schooling to municipalities (Brasil, 1996; Valente & Arelaro, 2002).

The LDB reflects a mixture of neoliberal and non-neoliberal influence. It was created amidst a political context that favored a diminishing role of the state as a provider of basic social services, market deregulation, and the submission of facets of education to market forces (Valente & Arelaro, 2002). As such, the LDB led to the creation of a range of governance, access, and quality goals and guidelines for public schools such as expanding the number of school days from 180 to 200 (IBGE, 2008). It also sparked decentralization according to neoliberal efficiency rationale. This has included the “transfer of federal resources to states and municipalities to shore up basic education” as well as “reductions in spending per pupil across the board” (Wong &
Balestino, 2003, p. 74). On the other hand, the LDB represents a “compromise” between neoliberal and progressive interests in that it “emphasizes the need for fundamental education, aims at universalizing access, and grants a reasonable degree of autonomy for states and municipalities to construct their educational systems” (Gandin, 2007, p. 188).

National and Municipal Evaluations & Ranking Systems

The creation of national and municipal evaluations and rankings since the 1990s is another example of educational decentralization/centralization policies in Brazil (Crespo et al., 2000; Hypolito et al., 2009; Marcondes, 1999). The Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas (INEP, or National Institute for Educational Studies and Research) is responsible for gathering and evaluating information on basic education throughout the country. One of its chief roles is overseeing the implementation of what are regarded as two of the most important quality indicators of basic education in Brazil, the aforementioned Prova Brasil and the SAEB. The SAEB is a national diagnostic exam that was initiated in 1990. It is administered every two years to students at the end of both stages of primary education, the fifth and ninth years of schooling, and at the end of high school. This exam measures students’ performance in Portuguese and mathematics as well as includes socioeconomic questionnaires. The abilities measured and specifications used match the LDB and the PCNs (F. Soares, 2004).

Standardized evaluations have greatly affected schooling and, more specifically, public school curriculum in Brazil. They are designed to enhance educational quality by providing quantifiable performance benchmarks (Fischman et al., 2003). In doing so tests like the SAEB have shifted the emphasis to the results of schooling (Crespo et al., 2000). These tests are also seen as ways for stimulating competition among schools and municipal systems (Valente &
Arelaro, 2002). Such competition is viewed as a recipe to ensure efficient delivery of a quality education and as a key to success in the economic market (Valente & Arelaro, 2002).

This competition is pegged to an elaborate ranking system (Valente & Arelaro, 2002). The SAEB, Brazil Exam, and student passing rates are linked with the IDEB, a nationwide ranking system that functions as a “management instrument” to “monitor the quality of the educational system of the country” (Aranha, 2008; IGBE, 2008, p. 43). The IDEB measures the quality of every school and each municipal school system every two years. The resulting IDEB rankings are associated with prestige and status. Sombra (2008) refers to the IDEB in highlighting that Bahia is ranked as having the sixth worst public education quality in the nation. Ribeiro (2008) also cites this index in reporting that fifth-year students in Piauí showed the greatest improvement in mathematics among any state in the past decade.

Standardized exams and rankings are not restricted to the national level, nor are they only connected with a quality management index. Municipal exams and rankings are also tied to funding. In Teresina fifth and ninth-year students’ performance on the SEMEC exams are used to rank each school in the municipal system according to categories of A, B, C and lower. The schools with the highest rankings receive a monetary reward from SEMEC.

Overall then, national and municipal evaluations and rankings provide nationwide standardized rules, elements of control, and incentives for competition and funding (Valente & Arelaro, 2002). Together with reported near universal access to primary schooling, equal opportunities for a quality education have presumably been extended to all (Valente & Arelaro, 2002). Some therefore profess that testing and evaluation permeate the organization and initiatives of public schooling in Brazil (Sousa, 2007; Wong & Balestino, 2003).
PCNs

The PCNs are the centerpiece of recent education policy and curriculum reform in Brazil. They are the fruit of a two-year process of national and regional discussions among teachers from all levels of schooling, state and municipal secretaries of education, state education councils, and specialists from different academic disciplines (Brasil, 1997a). The PCNs are a compilation of pedagogical orientations, evaluation criteria, objectives, and contents for public primary schooling.

As with the LDB, the PCNs reflect a combination of decentralization/centralization elements as well as neoliberal and non-neoliberal contestation for control over education policy and curriculum. The national definition of goals and guidelines signifies centralization. The PCNs represent a national level of curriculum “concretization” and are envisioned as a way to guarantee a quality education for all public primary school students (Moraes, 2003). They were meant to raise curriculum standards as well as “upgrade Brazil’s economic competitiveness in the international arena” (Borges, 2008, p. 238). They were also created to implement the national evaluation and ranking system (Arelaro, 2005; Gandin, 2007; Hypolito et al., 2009; Marcondes, 1999; Valente & Arelaro, 2002). Some see this as neoliberal attempts of control (Canen & Grant, 1999; Gandin, 2007; Hypolito et al., 2009). Gandin (2007) states:

These parameters were advertised as mere guidance to schools and school systems, but there is a consensus in the educational community that they were introduced as a test for the establishment of a national curriculum. As soon as the government launched them there was a very coordinated response from teachers’ unions, schools of education in universities, and professional associations. The resistance was so strong that the
parameters remained as guidelines only. Although they are only parameters, not requirements, there is no doubt that the institution of the National Curricular Parameters represented an attempt to control the destiny of the Brazilian curriculum. (p. 188)

He adds that the PCNs have had a particularly strong influence on municipal systems lacking education plans or organized teacher movements but less so in cities such as Porto Alegre where such elements were already in place (Gandin, 2007).

Conversely, streams of critical educational thought saturate the PCNs. A quality education is defined in the PCNs as an “educational practice aligned with the social, political, economic, and cultural needs and reality of Brazil” and that fosters “the formation of autonomous, critical and participatory citizens” (Brasil, 1997a, p. 27). The PCNs address the need to engage with pressing societal issues in the curriculum via transversality/contextualization (Brasil, 1997c; Macedo, 1998, 1999; Moraes, 2003). As well, the PCNs represent a shift from strict curriculum regulation and prescriptive, detailed national curriculum standards (Fischman et al., 2003). They are meant to provide an impetus for the formulation of municipal and school curricula (Brasil, 1997a; Gvirtz, 2002). These are considered essential for the transformation of societal realities and the construction of a more democratic society (Brasil, 1997a).

Municipalization

*Municipalization* is the shifting of political authority from federal and state to municipal levels (Azevedo, 2002; Selcher, 1998; Souza & Faria, 2004). Educational decentralization via municipalization sprouted from economic and political roots. Municipalization is rooted in the *Projeto Pro-município* (Pro-municipal Project) of the 1970s in the Northeast. This was a funding program that designated resources for the poorest municipalities in the region and was the “fruit
of an agreement between Brazil and the World Bank” (Arelaro, 2005, p. 1043). Municipalization is also allied with the Constitution of 1988 and its granting of substantial political authority to municipalities as local government units (Selcher, 1998). What’s more, the explosion of new municipalities can largely be attributed to the fact that states are obliged to receive and redistribute federal funds to municipalities (Borges, 2008; Sands, 2008). Sands (2008) explains:

By the time Cardoso took office, almost 90 percent of all municipalities relied on intergovernmental transfers to provide them with 95 percent of their revenue. Some state-level elites, moreover, availed themselves of a strategy that entitled them to an increased share of the federal treasury: they created more municipalities. The state of Maranhão, under the leadership of Governor Roseana Sarney of the Partido Frente Liberal (PFL) (1997-2000), created 95 new municipalities simply by dividing already existing ones. All these new municipalities, however humble, received intergovernmental transfers. During the first ten years of the democratic regime, state governments created more than 1,300 municipalities. (p. 97)

Municipalization has been a central aspect of political and education reform in Brazil in recent decades (Adrião, 2008; Azevedo, 2002; Selcher, 1998; Souza & Faria, 2004). Educational decentralization by way of municipalization has been reinforced with the LDB, which places responsibility for primary schooling in the hands of municipal governments (Sands, 2008). Though it in fact involves a collaborative governance of education from national to municipal levels, the core idea of municipalization is the decentralization of primary public school governance from state to municipal levels (Adrião, 2008; Azevedo, 2002; Derqui, 2001; Sarmento, 2005). The municipalization of schooling has been particularly prominent in the
Northeast, where there is a longer history of municipal responsibility for schooling and where municipal schools have enrolled more students than state schools since 1975 (Plank, 1990; Valente & Arelaro, 2002). With over 80% of elementary school students studying at public municipal schools, the Northeast region represents the highest concentration of students in municipal school systems in the country (INEP, 2008).

Municipalization was purported to enhance democratic participation in municipal political processes and lead to more locally relevant schooling (Sarmento, 2005). More specifically, it was intended to promote greater municipal autonomy in overseeing financing, administration, curriculum, and pedagogy (Sarmento, 2005). For example, in Bahia where 1,720 public schools and over 350,000 elementary school students shifted from state to municipal schools between 1998 and 2006, municipalization has involved the “transfer of buildings, students and workers to the responsibility of the municipality” (SMEC, 2006, p. 14). Along with curricular autonomy and administrative management, municipalities in Bahia have become responsible for the maintenance of physical conditions and other aspects of municipal schools, as well as for dispersing resources to schools (SMEC, 2006).

On a financial note, municipalization has been hailed as a more “cost-effective way” of “delivering education” (Derqui, 2001, p. 565). A prime example is the national Fundo de Manutenção e Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica (FUNDEB, or the Fund for the Development of Basic Education). FUNDEB and its predecessor, FUNDEF, were created to ensure that the constitutionally mandated 18% of federal government resources, 25% of state and municipal government funds, and 20% of state and municipal revenue gained through taxes and intergovernmental transfers would be earmarked for basic education and distributed
appropriately to state and municipal governments (Sands, 2008). The amount each municipality receives is based on the number of students enrolled in that municipal system (Sands, 2008). FUNDEF and FUNDEB were designed to increase transparency, reduce corruption, diminish regional disparities, and decentralize fund distribution responsibilities from national to municipal levels in order to improve the “efficiency and equality in the distribution of resources for primary education” (Oliveira, 2004, p. 65; Sands, 2008; Schwartzman, 2004).

A second example of municipalization is that each municipal system decides how to organize schooling. The restructuring of schooling from grade levels to two or three-year cycles has been implemented as a measure to keep youth in school and reduce repetition and drop out rates (Martins, 2009; Valente & Arelaro, 2002). Cycles are also considered cost-saving measures since students are to be moved through rather than repeat grade/year levels (Valente & Arelaro, 2002). In terms of pedagogical rationale, cycles have been instituted as a departure from the hierarchical organization of curriculum knowledge by grades as well as a move away from a fragmented, year-by-year organization and conception of knowledge irrelevant to local realities (Valente & Arelaro, 2002). Cycles are likewise related to the conceptualization of curriculum knowledge as a dynamic process as opposed to regarding it as static information to be acquired in a cumulative sense or within a specific timeframe (Sousa, 2007).

Cycles have been implemented in assorted ways in municipal education systems throughout Brazil. Some systems are using a combination of year levels and cycles while others have only implemented cycles. SEMEC in Teresina decided on cycles called blockos. The first bloco or cycle comprises the first three years of elementary school while the second is for years four and five (SEMEC, 2008). All municipal elementary school students in Teresina
automatically pass from year one to three within the first cycle and from year four to five within the second. However, students only progress from the first to the second cycle and from the second cycle to the third, which is the sixth year or middle school, if they are passed by teachers in consultation with school administrators (Tiessa, personal communication, 2008). Students who do not pass must repeat and pass the respective year to continue to the subsequent cycle.

With roots in the LDB and PCNs, a final example of decentralization by way of municipalization has been the creation of distinct municipal education plans and curricula (Sarmento, 2005; Souza & Faria, 2004). Given that these municipal curricula are to be contextually relevant, the curriculum of for instance, Curitiba in the country’s South region is expected to differ from the curriculum of Aracajú in the nation’s Northeast. As will be described in Chapter 6, even cities in the same region have established varied curriculum guidelines.

School Decentralization

The most recent offshoot of municipalization has been school decentralization. While this has taken manifold forms throughout the country (Derqui, 2001; Meade & Gershberg, 2008), two commonalities have been the local management of resources and funds along with greater autonomy for localized governance (Derqui, 2001; Monfredini, 2002). The creation of school councils epitomizes school decentralization.

The councils are made up of the school principal, representative teachers and other school employees as well as representative parents and students. School councils play a central role in school management and in enforcing accountability. The roles include the monitoring of the allocation of funding and monitoring school performance by examining student achievement on national standardized tests. They are also responsible for
approving the school improvement plan; an annual plan related to the general management of pedagogical aspects in the school that is developed by the principal. (Meade & Gershberg, 2008, p. 309)

Furthermore, as mentioned in the LDB and PCNs, and of direct relevance to my research, public schools are to have autonomy over their own curriculum. Such decentralized autonomy reflects a conception of curriculum not as a finished product sent to schools, but rather as a process of redefinition by and in schools (Domingues et al., 2000). In line with this teachers are regarded as “agents” and producers of curriculum (Domingues et al., 2000, p. 69).

Pedagogical autonomy is illustrated by school pedagogical proposals or projects that each school and community is to collectively elaborate (Monfredini, 2002; Moraes, 2003). Four aspects of Sabiá’s *Projeto Político Pedagógico* (Pedagogic Policy Project) are noteworthy for my research. First, it emphasizes that the community should participate in the school and that the school should transform the reality of the community. Second, the conception of education centers on the idea that students become capable of critically analyzing and intervening in societal realities. Third, a “pedagogic practice oriented towards change” is espoused. Fourth, the curriculum is founded on the principles of “the student construction of knowledge” and the teacher as a “mediator of the pedagogic process.” Similarly, the *Proposta Pedagógica da Escola* (School Pedagogic Proposal) of Tucano in Teresina has three chief features related to my research. First, though organized by knowledge areas, the proposal calls for an interdisciplinary curriculum and pedagogy. Second, it states that curriculum knowledge areas, students’ knowledge, and local realities should be integrated. Finally, it advocates group work and the “co-construction of knowledge” in classrooms.
5.3 The Politics of Education Policies

There has been substantial debate over the impacts of educational decentralization/centralization policies in Latin America (Arnove, 1997; Derqui, 2001). While rationale for such have been cited above, arguments against these polices offer instructive insight into their multilayered complexities and shortcomings. I focus on three contestations pertinent to my research on municipal public schooling in Brazil: (a) decentralizing responsibility, increasing accountability, and reducing autonomy; (b) quantitative conceptualizations and measures of quality; and (c) exacerbating inequity and inequality.

Decentralizing Responsibility, Increasing Accountability & Reducing Autonomy

Decentralization/centralization constitutes a contradictory alliance that exerts substantial control over curricula (Hypolito et al., 2009; Karlsen, 2000; Zadja, 2004). A critique of this alliance in Brazil and elsewhere is that it has decentralized responsibility for transforming educational quality to schools, increased accountability for results of sub-national levels to the central state, and reduced municipal and school autonomy (Gomes et al., 2000; Hypolito et al., 2009; Monfredini, 2002; Schiefelbein, 2004; Schugurensky, 2003; Valente & Arelaro, 2002). Decentralization is an “attractive way to transfer tough decisions, as well as the accountability for results, away from the central level” (Schiefelbein, 2004, p. 362). The central government assumes less responsibility for educational outcomes, yet supposedly provides the necessary conditions for a quality education (Klees, 2008).

As part of this, while justified in terms of enhanced school and municipal autonomy, decentralization has been complemented by increased accountability of local levels to the central state. This is accomplished through a range of “control mechanisms” the state employs over
education (Hypolito et al., 2009; Schugurensky, 2003, p. 57; Valente & Arelaro, 2002). The intertwined ranking and national evaluation system of Brazil typifies this. It reflects quality improvement indicators from national, state, and municipal to school levels and is utilized to check whether schools are “transmitting contents considered relevant, generating competition, selecting the best and rewarding and punishing” (Valente & Arelaro, 2002, p. 89). Such mechanisms decrease school autonomy and local control over education as central regulatory pressures and accountability measures rise (Fischman et al., 2003; Hypolito et al., 2009; Mazurek et al., 2000). Tatoo (1999) and Whitty et al. (1998) find that a major paradox of the supposed devolution of authority is that federal governments increase centralized control over curriculum and other aspects of education systems. Fischman et al. (2003) expound on the neoliberal current pushing this phenomenon in Latin America:

Ministries of education in the region not only have more power to determine school policies, curriculum changes, and evaluation processes, but also have tighter control over the performance of individual schools. These performances are linked to the goals of financial programs of economic adjustment, devised and supervised by international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. This type of control is not driven by educational principles or needs. (p. 9)

This neoliberal conceptualization of education has led to a management model of schooling in which teachers are held accountable for quantifiable student output improvements indicated by standardized test scores (Armove, 1997; Kempner & Jurema, 2002; Klees, 2008). Teachers in turn are blamed for shortcomings and are burdened with greater productivity demands (Hypolito et al., 2009; Valente & Arelaro, 2002). Due to this accountability for meeting
centralized quality indicators, schools and teachers also lose autonomy (Hypolito et al., 2009; Mazurek et al., 2000). For instance, pedagogic projects have been contested for the imposition of a “series of bureaucratic controls” and unreasonable expectations for transforming local realities (Monfredini, 2002). This is more problematic considering that resource limitations inhibit the realization of such projects (Monfredini, 2002). On top of this, school pedagogic proposals are tethered to accountability measures in the form of data reports schools must submit to municipal secretaries of education (Monfredini, 2002). Hence, “underlying the rhetoric about quality is the state’s desire to make schools more publicly accountable” (Gomes et al., 2000, p. 46).

Quantitative Conceptualizations & Measures of Quality

The neoliberal emphasis on quantitative gains rather than substantive qualitative improvements is another principal criticism. Statistics such as reduced drop out and failure rates, raised test scores, increased enrollment percentages, IDEB rankings, the amount of money spent on each student and textbooks, and the length and number of school days are regarded as misleading indicators of educational quality (Aranha, 2008; Sands, 2008; Santos, 2002; Torres, 2002; Valente & Arelaro, 2002). Enrollment figures and failure and drop out rates for instance allegedly reflect an inclusive educational system. Similarly, the implementation of cycles and the emphasis on continuous progression to keep kids in schools supposedly ensure access to a quality education for all. As such, “democratic” roles are purportedly fulfilled by the state (Valente & Arelaro, 2002). Yet quantitative gains can be problematic as Sands (2008) elucidates:

Municipal school systems across the country also reported increases in enrollment. However, there were very few controls to ensure that these reports were accurate, and even fewer to ensure that newly enrolled students had desks to sit in, teachers to instruct
them, or even schools to attend. . . . Thousands of students were squeezed into shorter
instruction times, or not assigned to any school at all. (p. 102)

Additionally, quantitative improvements have been seen in economic rather than
democratic or pedagogical terms. For example, the state of São Paulo implemented an
“automatic promotion” policy for primary schooling in the late 1990s in which students
automatically passed from one grade level to another (Valente & Arelaro, 2002). This was
justified as a cost-saving measure. The São Paulo State Council of Education stated, “Repetition
constitutes a pernicious drain whereby precious financial education resources are wasted. The
cost of a failed student corresponds to a year of schooling and is simply wasted money” (as cited

Quantitative quality indicators such as reduced cost-per-pupil expenditures and elevated
rankings are also connected with financial rewards (Valente & Arelaro, 2002). FUNDEF for
example legitimated the need for increased enrollment in municipal systems since funds are
gauged and distributed on a per-student basis (Frigotto & Ciavatta, 2003; Sands, 2008). An
infamous case is from São Luís, Maranhão in Brazil’s Northeast where municipal school
enrollment increased by more than 17,000 students in one year. Local press later reported that the
“municipal school system had enrolled thousands of children but had forgotten to find space for
them” (Sands, 2008, p. 105).

A related criticism of the neoliberal torrent infusing such education policies is the lack of
attention to the enacted curriculum. That is, critics maintain that the focus on quantitative quality
indicators disregards day-to-day classroom pedagogical practices (Arnove, 1997; Klees; 2008;
Samoff, 2003a; Schiefelbein, 2004; Schugurensky, 2003). For example, while vehicles such as
the *Programa Bolsa Escola* (School Grant Program) have been lauded for transferring money to poor families to combat school attendance problems, they and national evaluations like the SAEB have been criticized for diverting attention from teaching and learning conditions needed to improve educational quality for all students (Kempner & Jurema, 2002; Santos, 2002; Tarabini, 2008). To the contrary and, ironically, the increase in the number of students in classrooms in many municipalities has contributed to the “precarious quality of education” (Azevedo, 2002, p. 63). Kempner and Jurema (2002) argue:

> This emphasis on “brick and mortar” solutions to educational problems ignores the interrelationship of the daily lives of students in the streets and in the schools. . . . Such policies devalue the educational function of schooling and reinforce the decline in the profession of teaching and the ability of teachers to mediate the lives students face outside the school. (pp. 343-344)

**Exacerbating Inequity & Inequality**

A third common critique is that decentralization/centralization policies have exacerbated social, economic, and educational inequity and inequality in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America (Arnowe, 1997; Borges, 2008; Fischman et al., 2003; Gadotti, 1997; Kempner & Jurema, 2002; Klees, 2008; Schugurensky, 2003). Since municipal funding in Brazil is attached to IDEB rankings and the percentage of students in school, there is inequitable distribution of resources among municipalities (Azevedo, 2002; Valente & Arelaro, 2002). Municipalities with fewer students receive less money than those with larger student populations (Frigotto & Ciavatta, 2003; Sands, 2008). Schools also end up competing with one another for resources as a case from the state of Pernambuco in the Northeast reveals (Azevedo, 2002). The reality has
been that more funding and resources flow to certain municipalities and schools than others (Valente & Arelaro, 2002). Unequal resource distribution and inequitable funding therefore cannot be dissociated from school quality (Arelaro, 2005; Meade & Gershberg, 2008).

This inequity is more problematic given the disparity of contextual conditions in different municipalities that impact the success with which resources are used to benefit school quality (Aranha, 2008; Arelaro, 2005; Derqui, 2001; Monfredini, 2002). The economic focus masks qualitative realities as it does not address or reflect contextual dilemmas such as violence and poverty (Monfredini, 2002). The complexity of implementing decentralization policies is also apparent given the shortage of financial and material resources together with a discrepancy of conditions across schools and regions, which are “likely to increase as a consequence of decentralization” (Derqui, 2001, p. 576; Monfredini, 2002). Further, controlling the distribution of funds is one thing. Controlling how funds are spent is another. This is supported with instances in the Northeast where politicians have used funds for personal gain and taken advantage of their “newly gained powers to reinforce their discretionary control over sub-national institutions” (Aranha, 2008; Borges, 2008, p. 235; Sands, 2008).

Although such policies in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America have “expanded the number of buildings, teachers, and students, their relevance for poor children and their families seems, thus far, limited, and they may well have resulted in new educational divisions and greater social polarization” (Fischman et al., 2003, p. 13). Quantitative foci have been disputed for not ensuring that all Brazilians have access to a “public school of quality” (Kempner & Jurema, 2002, p. 350). Gandin similarly claims that neoliberal market-oriented solutions to problems have “only exacerbated social exclusion and have been undermining public spaces that
could be used to discuss and minimize this exclusion” (2007, p. 179). Given that impacts of decentralization/centralization policies on the enacted curriculum are insufficiently understood (Astiz et al., 2002; Bjork, 2003; Derqui, 2001), a prominent implication then is highlighting the relation between such policies, the official curriculum, and enacted curriculum realities.

5.4 Conclusion

In spite of quantitative improvements in recent years, grave challenges continue to confront public primary schooling in Brazil. Decentralization/centralization policies have been implemented to improve educational quality and combat such dilemmas on account of democratic participation, cost-effectiveness, and locally relevant curricula. However, they remain contentious for decentralizing responsibility while increasing accountability and reducing autonomy, emphasizing quantitative measures and disregarding in-class teaching and learning, and furthering inequity and inequality. Such dynamics are also inadequately researched across the policy–curriculum span. Since curriculum policy-making involves attempts to dictate what counts as legitimate knowledge in curriculum documents (Cornbleth, 2000), the following chapter analyzes how knowledge is conceptualized in the official national and municipal curricula. It also facilitates comprehension of intended pedagogy–knowledge practices in the enacted curriculum.
Chapter 6 – Classification & Framing of Official Curriculum Knowledge

This chapter marks a transition to examining how knowledge is conceptualized in the official curriculum and how such conceptualization relates to the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy nexus. I relied on Basil Bernstein’s concepts of classification and framing as a conceptual framework for an analysis of knowledge in the official National Curriculum Parameters and municipal curriculum guidelines of Salvador, Bahia and Teresina, Piauí.

Classification and framing speak to boundary relations between curriculum knowledge areas, school and everyday knowledge, what is and is not meant to be transmitted in classrooms and how such is taught, as well as the intended authority teachers and students have in shaping curriculum knowledge (Bernstein, 1971; Scott, 2008). The relationships between the knowledge teachers and students bring to classrooms and the knowledge predetermined for transmission in the curriculum also indicate the legitimacy of and hierarchical relationship among them. By recognizing how knowledge is classified and framed, educators can deconstruct what counts as legitimate curriculum knowledge in the official curriculum as well as become more mindful of how such knowledge is intentioned to be engaged with in the enacted curriculum.

6.1 Classification of Knowledge in the National Curriculum Parameters

Classification speaks to the organization and treatment of knowledge in the official curriculum. It can be understood as the “degree of integration among different knowledge domains” (Scott, 2008, p. 76). This is typically evidenced by the organization of knowledge into subjects or curriculum knowledge areas. However, classification is also reflected by the insulation between curriculum knowledge and other knowledge such as that from communities (Bernstein, 1971). Classification is therefore not concerned with the organization within
knowledge areas, but rather with the relationships between different knowledge in the curriculum (Bernstein, 1971; Scott, 2008). As well, classification is portrayed by the differential emphasis on certain knowledge (Bernstein, 1971). “Classification refers to what counts as ‘good quality’ knowledge” (Abbas & McLean, 2007, p. 731). The stronger the classification, the more explicit is the delineation of knowledge domains, the thicker the boundaries between them, and the greater the hierarchical treatment of certain knowledge over others (Bernstein, 1971). Hence, these relationships also reveal status differences among knowledge in the curriculum.

The National Curriculum Parameters (PCNs) are a comprehensive, approximately 1,000-page collection of public primary school curriculum guidelines for the entire country. Written as a theoretical philosophy statement, the PCNs comprise 10 volumes. These are an introductory volume, distinct knowledge area volumes of Portuguese language, mathematics, natural sciences, history and geography, art, and physical education, and three volumes addressing the transversal themes of ethics, environment and health, and cultural plurality and sexual orientation. I analyzed the classification and framing of knowledge in four volumes for elementary schooling: (a) Volume 1 (Introduction of the National Curriculum Parameters), (b) Volume 3 (Mathematics), (c) Volume 8 (Presentation of the Transversal Themes), and (d) Volume 9 (Transversal Theme of the Environment). Within these, I focused on the second cycle, or last two years, of this stage of public education.

The structure of the PCNs displays strong degrees of classification. There is a clear delineation of curriculum knowledge areas and transversal themes. The PCNs cite two reasons for this separation into knowledge areas. One, so that students’ learning and teachers’ teaching is situated within a particular conceptualization of that body of knowledge. Secondly, so that
teachers can more easily measure students’ learning progress. The first part of each volume begins with an introduction that includes the main characteristics of the area and its role in primary school curriculum in Brazil, a review of how the teaching of that area has evolved in recent decades, and its societal relevance today. Each volume then describes the theoretical conception of the knowledge area or theme in relation to pedagogy, the objectives of that knowledge area or theme, and its contents.

In spite of the division of the curriculum into separate knowledge areas, the PCNs indicate these are to be integrated in classrooms via interdisciplinarity. The PCNs state that there should be a conceptual and pedagogical integration among them. This interdisciplinarity is one of the foundational characteristics reflecting weak classification.

Integration is also explicitly mentioned with reference to cycles. In addition to being devised to reduce grade repetition and failure and drop out rates, two or three-year cycles were designed to foster a less fragmented approach to curriculum knowledge, one not defined by fixed stages and timeframes (Brasil, 1997a). This mention of cycles is significant as it discloses an integrated conceptualization of curriculum knowledge areas across what were formerly referred to as grade levels, now called years of schooling. It thereby reveals that the organization of the elementary school system in Brazil is intertwined with a conceptualization of curriculum knowledge.

Another example of weak classification is the weight given to integrating the curriculum with the knowledge students bring to class.

The knowledges that are transmitted and recreated in the school gain relevance when they are products of a dynamic construction . . . between school knowledge and other
knowledges, between that which the student learns in school and which he brings to school. (Brasil, 1997a, p. 34)

The PCNs add that learning is meaningful only when students establish connections between school curriculum knowledge and knowledge derived from personal experience (Brasil, 1997a).

The PCNs also exhibit weak classification with the repeated mention of bridging curriculum knowledge with local realities. The PCNs maintain that the selection and organization of content should take into account contextual realities. They similarly underscore that students should understand the relevance and applicability of curriculum knowledge to such realities.

What’s more, the PCNs assert that knowledge such as that about math is dynamic and socially and historically situated and produced (Brasil, 1997b). On this note, the math volume stresses that “school contributes to overcoming the stereotype that mathematics is a knowledge produced exclusively by certain social groups or more developed societies” (Brasil, 1997b, p. 28).

Weak classification is correspondingly shown by transparent boundaries between curriculum knowledge and local realities in the form of transversal themes. These themes, embodying the pedagogical tenet of transversality, are to traverse the curriculum (Brasil, 1997c). National themes are intended to incorporate nationwide urgent issues into the curriculum (Brasil, 1997c). Locally relevant themes centered on issues such as transportation or violence are meant to supplement and potentially even replace the national themes depending on a school’s needs (Brasil, 1997c). For example, in large urban areas issues based on the theme of transportation might be particularly relevant (Brasil, 1997c). The incorporation of national and/or local themes in turn reinforces the building on students’ knowledge and experiences in the curriculum.

As well, weak classification is reflected in the conceptualization that themes be analyzed
and discussed through multiple knowledge areas in order to adequately examine the intricacies of each issue (Brasil, 1997c). The PCNs assert that these themes should pervade the curriculum rather than be mentioned in isolated instances or for token reference (Brasil, 1997c). The complexity of these themes means that no single knowledge area is sufficient for addressing them in classrooms. For example, the PCNs mention that environmental issues can only be partially understood through knowledge from, for instance, the discipline of geography. Rather, a thematic and multi-disciplinary pedagogy in which themes traverse and integrate curriculum knowledge areas is touted as more effective. In this sense, the PCNs suggest that each theme integrate the traditional curriculum knowledge areas so that all are drawn upon in order to address a particular theme.

A further illustration of weak classification is the intended societal impact of the transversal themes. These themes are seen as integral to the central aim of education emphasized throughout the PCNs: helping students develop the capacities to intervene in and transform social realities (Brasil, 1997c). The PCNs champion the engagement with social questions based on societal problems as necessary for enabling students to critically examine and comprehend reality, as well as to change their own lives (Brasil, 1997c).

A final point about the weak classification of knowledge in the PCNs is the lack of evident knowledge hierarchy in the curriculum. That is, in terms of the relationships between curriculum knowledge areas and between curriculum and outside school knowledge, there is no discussion of any knowledge being considered more valid than others. There is no indication that math or Portuguese for example have priority over history, geography, or science. Likewise, societal realities and students’ knowledge are not viewed as less legitimate than school
curriculum knowledge. In fact there is recurring mention of the need to integrate these in the curriculum. Moreover, the PCNs proclaim that transversal themes should be treated with equal importance as the traditional knowledge areas. Indeed the latter are held to be insufficient for a citizenship-oriented education (Brasil, 1997c).

6.2 Framing of Knowledge in the National Curriculum Parameters

The promulgated integrated relations among the knowledge areas and between curriculum knowledge and community realities and students’ knowledge reflect the pedagogical tenets of interdisciplinarity and transversality as well as weak classification of curriculum knowledge. These characteristics are also informative with respect to framing.

Framing refers to the intended pedagogical relationship between teachers and students shaped by the strength of the boundary between what may and may not be transmitted (Bernstein, 1971). Although framing has primarily been used to make sense of knowledge–pedagogy relations in the enacted curriculum, it also speaks to the extent to which certain knowledge is predetermined or standardized in the official curriculum and how explicit and minutely specified such knowledge is (Scott, 2008). Similarly, framing reveals how prescriptively mapped out the intended pedagogical process is (Scott, 2008; Sleeter & Stillman, 2005). Strong degrees of framing are reflected in highly prescriptive and detailed curricula that specify what knowledge is to be taught and how. Weak framing is a characteristic of curricula in which teachers and students have greater authority to incorporate and examine their knowledge, experiences, and lived realities rather than simply follow the official curriculum.

The organizational structure of the PCNs indicates a highly prescriptive curriculum and, as a result, strong framing. The first section of each volume addresses relations between students,
teachers, and curriculum knowledge, resources for teaching each knowledge area, the objectives for and contents of each knowledge area, the division of contents into blocks, the organization and sequence of contents to be taught, and evaluation criteria. The second section details these according to each knowledge area for each cycle of primary education (i.e., the second cycle being what were formerly known as the third and fourth grades). For example, 16 objectives are listed for the second cycle for math. Four content blocks such as “numbers and operations” are then described. Each content block contains eight to 16 objectives and is further divided into sub-categories.

On the other hand, the theoretical undercurrent of curricular “re-elaboration” reveals weak framing. The PCNs accentuate the need for the creation of contextually relevant state, municipal, and school curricula (Brasil, 1997a). Even the general objectives of primary education are to be redefined in accordance with local demands (Brasil, 1997a). Schools are to decide what is most appropriate in relation to their realities.

Weakly framed notions of pedagogy align with the emphasis on curriculum reconstruction. The PCNs are designed to serve as flexible pedagogical orientations. Teachers are (nominally) given the authority and autonomy to delve deeper into or restrict teaching and learning of certain contents in consideration of their contextual relevance and students’ needs. “Teaching cannot be limited to the establishment of a standard or homogenous and identical intervention for all students” (Brasil, 1997a, p. 61). Pedagogy is instead outlined as a continually changing process influenced by multiple factors (Brasil, 1997a).

Another element of weak framing is that the contents of each knowledge area are presented as conceptual, procedural, and attitudinal categories. Conceptual contents comprising
facts, concepts, principles, and theories, *procedural contents* that include abilities, methods, and strategies, and *attitudinal contents* such as values, attitudes, and norms are purported to align with the objectives of primary education (Brasil, 1997a). This open-ended notion of curriculum is important to note for another reason that is elucidated in the description of the procedural contents. The PCNs assert that the teaching of procedural contents “permits the inclusion of knowledges that have been traditionally excluded from instruction” (Brasil, 1997a, p. 52). This conception syncs with the notion of incorporating knowledge students bring to class, as well as with the idea that contents that aren’t predetermined can be addressed.

Weak framing can be observed in what has historically been a strongly framed and classified knowledge area: math. While the math volume offers sample problems and ideas of what teachers can do, it does not cite examples of how to integrate curriculum knowledge areas with math, nor offer any explanation about how much attention should be given to various contents or the order in which they should be taught. The objectives and pedagogic orientations resemble a theoretical discussion, not a list of pedagogical practices to follow or prepackaged knowledge to transmit. Case in point is one of the stated objectives of math: “the recognition of the use of percentages in daily contexts” (Brasil, 1997b, p. 56).

Weak framing is also evident in the conceptualization of the relation of pedagogy and knowledge in classrooms. The PCNs depict the enacted curriculum as a process of knowledge co-construction and analysis among teachers and students (Brasil, 1997a). To take an example, the instruction and learning of math is conceptualized as the student construction of knowledge rather than the teacher transmission of predefined knowledge (Brasil, 1997b). Collaborative problem-solving tasks in which students realize their capabilities of producing math knowledge
are endorsed (Brasil, 1997b, p. 33). In addition, the PCNs emphasize classroom interactions characterized by group work and cooperative learning (Brasil, 1997a). The PCNs argue that such interactions build on the knowledge and experiences students bring to class and facilitate knowledge co-construction.

A further aspect of weak framing is the extension of the curriculum beyond school walls. The use of authentic materials such as newspapers and films is advocated so that students are better able to associate and apply what they learn in school to society (Brasil, 1997a). The PCNs explain that such a connection between school and society entails shifting the locus of learning outside schools through excursions to locales of relevance to the curriculum. Although the PCNs promote certain pedagogical principles in this regard, they do not prescribe fixed practices. Instead they emphasize teacher and student autonomy and state that each school should ultimately decide what is best.

Such weak framing is demonstrated with the transversal themes. Unlike the knowledge areas such as math and history, the themes are not outlined according to school years or cycles. There isn’t any predetermined sequence or timeframe for incorporating them in the curriculum. Each municipality and school is also to decide which national and/or local themes are most pertinent to their reality. These themes and associated questions should be engaged with as they relate to each context (Brasil, 1997c). For instance, the theme of environment should be dealt with differently in rural areas of the Amazon versus urban periphery contexts (Brasil, 1997a, 1997d).

In a similar vein, the PCNs stress the importance of school pedagogic projects stemming from the realities of each locale. As part of these projects, curriculum knowledge boundaries are
expanded by the integration of community and school curriculum knowledge. The pedagogical relationship among teachers, students, and knowledge is also extended in that it is shaped by the participation and contributions of parents and community members. The intersection and production of knowledge in relation to local realities as opposed to nationally standardized curriculum knowledge reflects both weak classification and framing.

A final reflection of weak framing is that the PCNs portray the relations among students, teachers, knowledge, and pedagogy in political and directive dimensions. Curriculum knowledge is not conceptualized as finished information to be acquired, but rather as a non-neutral, social, and historical construction to be critically engaged with (Brasil, 1997a). It is to be linked with societal questions and help students better comprehend and intervene in their lived realities (Brasil, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c). To illustrate, one math objective is that students are able to “identify mathematical knowledges as a means for understanding and transforming the world around them” (Brasil, 1997b, p. 37). Taken together then, the knowledge areas and transversal themes transcend school boundaries and are to be based on and aimed at changing local realities.

6.3 Classification & Framing of Knowledge in Official Municipal Curricula

Although the PCNs are to be used as curriculum and pedagogical orientations for all public schools, municipalities are responsible for creating their own education plans and curriculum guidelines. Some municipalities have developed curricula for each knowledge area of public primary schooling, while others have published curriculum guidelines for a transversal thematic approach deemed most relevant to the particular locale. The municipalities of my ethnographic research, Salvador and Teresina, reflect these distinctive municipal curriculum approaches. At the time of my research, Salvador lacked municipal curriculum guidelines for
each knowledge area of the curriculum. Instead it had published a document about principles of educational quality that should orient municipal public schooling, together with guidelines for a citywide thematic approach of environmental education. In contrast, Teresina had published municipal curriculum guidelines addressing each knowledge area of all levels of municipal public primary schooling. The following sections detail my analysis of the classification and framing of knowledge in these municipal curriculum documents in both cities.

**Salvador Curriculum**

The foundational curriculum document in Salvador is the *Educação de Qualidade, Novos Rumos para a Cidade* (Quality Education, New Paths for the City). This document offers a portrait of public schooling in the city along with goals and guidelines for improving educational quality there. Its overarching aim is to assist municipal schools in both preparing youth for employment and creating a more just society (SMEC, 2005).

This document does not address specific knowledge areas of the municipal curriculum, yet it does emphasize several points that speak to weak classification and framing of curriculum knowledge. For one, it states that public schooling should be integrated with the needs and realities of local communities. As part of this integration, the enacted curriculum should value and build on local social and historical roots and the knowledge students bring to classrooms (SMEC, 2005). This “valorization of popular knowledge” is noted as particularly important in the “blackest city in the Americas, where the traces of African culture are so strong” (SMEC, 2005, p. 25). Secondly, the document affirms that the enacted curriculum should bridge school and community so that families, communities, and cultural organizations are part of schooling.
The second principal municipal curriculum document of Salvador is the *Diretrizes Curriculares de Educação Ambiental para as Escolas da Rede Municipal de Ensino de Salvador* (Environmental Education Curriculum Guidelines for Salvador’s Municipal Public School System). This document provides a theoretical orientation for pedagogical practices in the city’s municipal schools. At the heart of this orientation is the notion that schooling should help youth develop a critical consciousness of local realities (SMEC, 2006). In alignment with this, the document asserts that environmental education is inseparable from citizenship. It explains that environmental education requires new ways of relating to knowledge: It should be a contextual bridge that spans across all knowledge areas and between schools and surroundings (SMEC, 2006). These pedagogical principles reflect weak boundaries between curriculum knowledge areas and between school curriculum and community knowledge.

Weak classification is also evident in the three strands of transversality discussed. One is multidisciplinarity. This means that multiple disciplines should be analyzed with respect to environmental education. A second is interdisciplinarity, which as previously described, is a process of integrating knowledge areas of the curriculum. As the document mentions, this could be done by project work around the theme of garbage in which, for instance, students and teachers in science class could discuss trash problems and solutions whereas math could be used for relevant calculations (SMEC, 2006, p. 47). A third strand is transdisciplinarity. This refers to the production of knowledge by students across disciplinary boundaries (SMEC, 2006). The document contends that project-based learning centered on community needs should link these strands. Such projects might be based around “themes such as violence in public transportation, environmental preservation, land distribution, collective health, and unemployment” (SMEC,
2006, p. 48). Through them, students and teachers are to contrast curriculum and community knowledge, discover connections among curriculum knowledge areas, and generate responses to problems (SMEC, 2006).

The document also illustrates weak classification with the transparent boundaries between curriculum knowledge areas, communities, and environmental issues and concepts described. These illustrations are designed to help teachers perceive the inherent integration between knowledge areas and local realities (SMEC, 2006). For example, with regard to the history of Brazil, the guidelines mention that an analysis of historical cycles such as sugarcane, gold, and coffee can be used to investigate relations between nature and society (SMEC, 2006, p. 52). Likewise, the guidelines list themes such as deforestation, pollution, and poverty that could be discussed and analyzed using math concepts of area, volume, and proportionality together with procedures for collecting, organizing and interpreting data, forming hypotheses, and performing calculations.

Weak degrees of framing are also apparent in the conceptualization of pedagogy. A dialogical, project-based, community oriented problem-solving pedagogy is endorsed (SMEC, 2006). Projects are touted as a “democratic methodology” among teachers, students, and communities. The dialogical co-construction of knowledge among teachers and students is labeled as the “essence” of such pedagogy (SMEC, 2006, p. 45). Moreover, dialogue and projects are not only to be based on contextual realities. They should also incorporate problem-solving practices for intervening in and transforming said realities (SMEC, 2006).

An associated characteristic of weak framing is that the guidelines only offer broad suggestions of how environmental themes, local realities, and students’ and community
knowledge can be integrated across curriculum knowledge areas. There is no detailed teacher
guide for how environmental education can be integrated with each knowledge area. Only
general recommendations are provided. For example, for Portuguese and the focus on oral
language the document only states that topics such as water, air, and pollution can be addressed
by way of interviews, dramatizations, debates, and other activities (SMEC, 2006). Science is a
bit more specific but still minimally prescriptive. For instance, the guidelines say that students
and teachers can note the conditions of the surrounding environment, their homes, school, and
neighborhood and identify the presence or lack of facilities and/or public services required for
the maintenance of these areas (SMEC, 2006, p. 90). History reflects similar weak framing. The
guidelines elaborate that it can be integrated with environmental education through research
about a neighborhood’s past. This might include inviting longtime residents to share stories about
the neighborhood, comparing these with the present reality, discussing changes, and debating
positive and negative consequences (SMEC, 2006, pp. 98-99).

As with the PCNs then, Salvador’s municipal public elementary school curriculum shows
weak classification and framing. The conceptualization of the curriculum–pedagogy–knowledge
nexus is predicated on weak knowledge boundaries. It also envisions substantial autonomy and
authority for local actors to forge a contextually relevant and oriented curriculum rather than a
top-down imposition of a predetermined curriculum.

**Teresina Curriculum**

The *Diretrizes Curriculares do Município de Teresina* (Teresina Municipal Curriculum
Guidelines) were created via a collective citywide process. As Tiessa informed me and, as stated
in the guidelines themselves, they were formulated based on suggestions from teachers,
pedagogic coordinators, and school principals and were then sent to the Municipal Secretary of Education for Teresina (SEMEC) for official approval (SEMEC, 2008). The first part details conceptions of schooling, citizenship, curriculum, pedagogy, and knowledge along with transversality, interdisciplinarity, projects, and themes. The second part describes the theoretical and methodological orientations for each knowledge area together with the objectives, evaluation criteria, and abilities and contents of that area.

Five tenets stand out concerning classification and framing. One underlying notion is that education entails the “socialization, transmission, acquisition and production of knowledge” for participation in and transformation of societal realities (SEMEC, 2008, p. 129). The guidelines thus reflect a critical conception of curriculum as an intervention in society. Second, the guidelines underscore the need to contextualize curriculum knowledge in relation to local realities and students’ lives. “The school that aims to educate citizens should parallel the curricula of students’ lives. . . . It’s indispensable that the school values the knowledges students bring to school” (SEMEC, 2008, p. 137). Another facet of this contextualization is the applicability of curriculum knowledge to society. The guidelines express that students should learn to apply math concepts to daily life situations in order to “facilitate the interpretation, comprehension, and transformation of the world around them” (SEMEC, 2008, p. 197). As with the PCNs and Salvador’s municipal curriculum then, the conceptualized relations among curriculum knowledge, the knowledge students bring to class, and contextual realities reflect open boundaries and therefore weak classification.

A third principle portraying weak classification and weak framing is knowledge integration. The conceptualization of integration along horizontal and vertical “axles” is
purported to parallel the notions of interdisciplinarity and transversality elaborated in the PCNs (SEMEC, 2008). As with the PCNs, the horizontal axles refer to knowledge as comprising intertwined conceptual, procedural, and attitudinal contents. The vertical organization of knowledge means teachers and students continually revisit and further examine what they’ve studied (SEMEC, 2008). These axles are overlapped by transversal themes deemed necessary for helping students comprehend “social reality and rights and responsibilities in relation to . . . political participation” (SEMEC, 2008, p. 140).

While this integration presumably reveals weak classification, ironically there are no examples of how it mirrors interdisciplinarity or transversality. To the contrary, the organization of the second part of the guidelines consists of segmented knowledge areas. The presentation of each knowledge area opens with objectives, theoretical and methodological rationale, and evaluation criteria followed by lists of abilities and contents for each year of schooling. For example, for the fifth year of math there are 19 abilities together with contents listed as four axles or themes called Numbers & Operations, Space & Form, Quantities & Measurements, and Information Analysis (SEMEC, 2008, pp. 210-211). These are further divided into sub-topics across three units. Nevertheless, there is no specific mention of how these might be integrated with other knowledge areas or with local realities. There are only broad statements such as the importance of using contextualized “situation-problems” so that students can apply math knowledge “to their daily lives” and are able to “understand and transform their reality” (SEMEC, 2008, p. 196). As well, while there are specified abilities and contents for each unit, the guidelines clarify that there is no fixed sequence to teaching them. Consequently, the document displays high classification in terms of how knowledge areas are presented, yet weak
framing in that teachers are to determine what is most appropriate for their reality.

A fourth tenet is dialogical pedagogy. The guidelines cite Paulo Freire in maintaining that classrooms should be places where students construct knowledge rather than simply receive knowledge transmitted by teachers. In this vein the guidelines conceptualize teachers and students as agents in the dialogical construction of knowledge. Teachers and students are therefore regarded as having significant autonomy and authority. This points to weak classification and framing in that knowledge is to be forged in class as opposed to predetermined content transmitted by teachers.

Lastly, the Teresina municipal guidelines address school curricular autonomy. They proclaim that each school, in collaboration with communities, should elaborate its own “curriculum of a citizenship school” (SEMEC, 2008, p. 133). This locally created curriculum–pedagogy–knowledge nexus is a sign of weak boundaries between school and community. It is also representative of weak framing as it contrasts with the notion of a preordained curriculum.

6.4 Conclusion

The analysis of the classification and framing of official curriculum knowledge facilitates understanding of what counts as legitimate curriculum knowledge and pedagogy. With the exception of one aspect of Teresina’s municipal curriculum, the PCNs and the municipal curricula of Salvador and Teresina reveal weak classification and framing. In terms of classification, all documents emphasize the integration among curriculum knowledge areas, espouse the contextualization of curriculum knowledge with societal realities and the knowledge students bring to class, and advocate a societal transformative application of curriculum knowledge. Calls for a locally forged and contextualized curriculum–pedagogy–knowledge
nexus in the enacted curriculum are evidence of weak degrees of framing. Altogether then, “interdisciplinarity and contextualization comprise the first significant mandate in federal policy for . . . the inclusion of marginalized youth and their realities in the day-to-day workings of public classrooms” (Wong & Balestino, 2003, pp. 77-78).

This analysis also spotlights contradictions and ambiguities in the intertwined pedagogical concepts of interdisciplinarity and transversality. Such findings supplement Macedo’s (1998, 1999) observations about the PCNs presented in Chapter 2. To restate, the PCNs propose interdisciplinarity as a tenet, yet lack clear illustrations of this principle. Not to mention they are organized in fragmented fashion according to the traditional disciplines. Furthermore and, arguably due to this organizational logic and structure, the PCNs propose that transversal themes integrate the knowledge areas yet do not indicate how such integration might take place or specify how each knowledge area relates to the themes. Thus, the organization of the PCNs implies that societal realities in the form of transversal themes are less important than the traditional knowledge areas.

These official curriculum ambiguities and contradictions might hinder the enactment of interdisciplinarity and contextualization. Macedo (1998, 1999) reasons that the disciplinary, segmented treatment of knowledge areas in the official curriculum, together with how schools are organized around such, make it difficult for teachers to integrate knowledge areas and school and society. This incompatibility is striking given that interdisciplinarity and contextualization are presented as cornerstones of public school reform. It is also noteworthy since these principles suggest that teachers “transform their educational practice in ways that better meet the educational interests and needs of marginalized youth” (Wong & Balestino, 2003, p. 78).
Accordingly, though an examination of the classification and framing of official curriculum knowledge helps make partial sense of curriculum knowledge, it is insufficient. Inconsistencies abound between policies on paper and how such are implemented in the enacted curriculum realm of classrooms (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Apple, 2004; Ball, 1994, 1998; Cornbleth, 2000; Gvirtz & Beech, 2004; Santos, 2002). It is therefore essential to supplement an investigation of the official curriculum with a scrutiny of the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy nexus in the enacted curriculum together with relations between curriculum, policy, and global forces. Doing so can uncover whether decentralized autonomy and authority is real or illusional. It can also provide a more comprehensive understanding of how curriculum knowledge legitimacy is situated within multilevel dynamics. Chapters 7 and 8 present two central findings that emerged from my inquiry into what knowledge is engaged with, and how and why it is done so in the enacted curriculum in each site of my research.
Chapter 7 – Curriculum Integration in the Enacted Curriculum

This chapter presents one theme from my research findings on curriculum knowledge dynamics in two municipal public elementary schools in Brazil’s Northeast. It highlights what knowledge was engaged with, and how and why it was done so in the enacted curriculum at Sabiá in Salvador and Tucano in Teresina according to two overlapping sub-themes. These patterns emerged from observations of the focus teacher’s classes throughout one semester in each school, semi-structured interviews with participants, and informal interviews with participants and other pedagogic staff. It should be noted that in both Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 I simultaneously present and discuss my findings in relation to the literature. I have not devoted separate chapters for doing so. I then close with my conclusion, Chapter 9, that further analyzes my findings and their significance.

The interviews were conducted in Portuguese and translated by me. I’ve elected not to list the dates of staff comments to protect their identity. Regarding the observations, I’ve selected a handful of vignettes from each research site. These are crucial for understanding how classroom knowledge dynamics are grounded in particular contexts. In some instances I do not provide the research site or focus teachers’ names. This omission was made to avoid personalizing teachers’ behaviors. First, however, I begin with a contextual bridge to each site.

Each morning session at Sabiá begins with students entering through an iron gate staffed by a security guard and lining up in front of their teachers. Samara or the vice-principal leads students and teachers in a prayer followed by a version of “If you’re happy and you know it clap your hands.” Students then follow their teachers to their classrooms. Simone’s class goes to their second-floor room where over 30 9 to 13-year-old students sit single file facing a
blackboard that stretches the width of the room. The east side of the room is heated by morning rays beaming in through glassless windows, yet is drenched during downpours. Class starts between 7:40 and 8:00 a.m. and continues until the daily recreio (break) around 10:15 a.m.. During the recreio students receive a small meal that municipal public schools are obligated to provide. Classes end at 11:25 a.m., at which time teachers escort their students to the front gate.

With temperatures surpassing 32 °C as they climb to over 40 °C from August till December, each morning session at Tucano begins with students lining up in a patio area around 7:15 a.m.. The Teresina anthem then plays, followed by a message from an administrator. Teachers socialize in the teachers’ room until a bell signals them to lead students to their classrooms. In Tânia’s classroom metal shutters and ceiling fans are briefly opened and turned on, sending countless mosquitoes into flight. The 36 students, who range in age from 10 to 13, sit in three double-file rows facing an expansive white board. Class starts at approximately 7:30 a.m. and goes until the recreio around 9:20 a.m., at which point students eat and play in the patio area while teachers reenergize over coffee and snacks. Classes resume until school lets out at 11:10 a.m..

7.1 (Inter)disciplinarity

Interdisciplinarity is one of two intertwined pedagogical tenets promoted in the official curriculum as central to achieving a quality public school education and intended to traverse national, municipal, and school curricula throughout Brazil (Brasil, 1997c; Domingues et al., 2000). Summarized in the PCNs as the “relation between disciplines” (Brasil, 1997c, p. 39), interdisciplinarity departs from a disciplinary treatment of knowledge in schools through the integration of disciplines or knowledge areas in the curriculum. Interdisciplinarity is deemed
vital for constructing knowledge in relation to particular contexts (Wong & Balestino, 2003), as well as for addressing and transforming societal realities (Domingues et al., 2000; Macedo, 1999). However, the inclusion of minimal concrete examples in the curriculum documents and the implied high degree of curricular and pedagogical autonomy at the school level yields an understanding as to how this principle might be interpreted and enacted in various ways. My findings similarly indicate that it is connected to differing curricular organization, pedagogical practices, and understandings of theory and practice among pedagogic staff within the sub-national region of the Northeast.

Knowledge Area Integration

Interdisciplinarity was cited as a guiding pedagogic principle of both schools. In spite of the curricular organization of Tucano where fourth and fifth-year teachers teach separate knowledge areas, an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge is championed in the school’s pedagogic proposal. Pedagogic staff also asserted that curriculum knowledge areas were “integrated” at Tucano. Tiessa commented:

It’s difficult for one teacher to teach all the content areas. We take advantage of the teacher’s background . . . her affinity and familiarity with the content and the specific requirements of the content area. . . . These teachers, in spite of teaching at different times, that each teaches different content areas . . . their work is integrated starting with their planning. . . . And when the content is being taught to students, in the execution of the planning, they are always conversing.
Tânia likewise said her classes on math and science and those of Telma who taught Portuguese, history, and geography were integrated. “I think there is a complement. Because when I was teaching the solar system in science, she was teaching the solar system in geography. So she was providing a geographic aspect, and me from the natural sciences.” Tânia also cited the example of when a student reads a word problem in math, that he or she is using Portuguese skills. She added, “Science encompasses the environment. Math too. The learning is integrated. For example, when I have a student read a situation problem, the student is also using Portuguese and text interpretation.”

Thaís also affirmed the presence of interdisciplinary teaching and learning at Tucano. To echo what Tiessa had stated, Thaís pointed out that teachers plan together in this regard. She also emphasized that they “need this integration” because “knowledge encompasses many things” and it’s not possible to teach science and, for example, Portuguese separately. She and Tatiana contrasted the interdisciplinary pedagogy in elementary school with the segmented, discipline-oriented teaching students will encounter in middle school. “We do interdisciplinarity with all the disciplines, there they cut them” (Thaís).

Knowledge Area Fragmentation

Interdisciplinarity was also touted as a guiding principle of Sabiá by Samara. In contrast to Samara and Tucano pedagogic staff, however, Simone felt “subjects are taught in isolated ways” at Sabiá. This was so even though she taught all knowledge areas to her fifth-year students. First, I illustrate how her perspectives parallel a pattern that stood out from my observations: Knowledge areas were tested and often taught in fragmented fashion in both contexts. I then depict the reasons Simone gave for knowledge area segmentation.
Though my research did not focus on testing, it is essential to note that the school, municipal, and national exams, along with the reviews for them, exemplified knowledge area fragmentation in both contexts. The halfway point of each semester was marked by school exams for Portuguese, math, history, geography, and science. These were created by different teachers. As well, there were municipal and national exams, yet only for math and Portuguese.

Given this segmented evaluation of knowledge areas, it was not surprising that the in-class engagement with them was generally characterized by strong disciplinary boundaries. This was evident from the outset in Salvador where the first week was devoted entirely to diagnostic assessment of students’ Portuguese abilities while the second week centered on diagnostic math exercises. The isolated treatment of curriculum knowledge areas was also apparent during the review classes where one week at both the halfway point and end of the semester was set aside during which each day students had a review for one knowledge area followed by an exam for that area. For instance, an April class was a review for the school Portuguese test. It comprised a dictation exercise, identification of digraphs in these words, and classification of the words according to their number of syllables. Class the following day began with a math review task so that students “are reminded how to respond on the math exam” (Simone). The first part of the task challenged students to work individually to deconstruct numbers such as 1,245,789 into categories by identifying the value each digit represented. For the second part students had to write out the number 94,878,436 in words. Another segmented knowledge area review was a class in preparation for the geography exam that day. The “Geography exercise” presented on the board challenged students to, for example, match Brazilian states with their capital cities.
I might have discerned interdisciplinary patterns across Tânia’s and Telma’s classes as Tiessa and Tânia maintained, but my observations were restricted to one focus teacher in each context. For this reason, I can only speak to observed knowledge area fragmentation tendencies within Tânia’s classroom at Tucano. One of the problems during an October “Math Class Task Review” for a national math exam was to convert the following population into a number and then identify the value of each digit: “The city of Parnaíba has one hundred thirty-two thousand two hundred and thirty-five inhabitants.” Although Parnaíba is the second largest city in Piauí and the problem comprised math and geography, the significance of the population and the link between math and geography were not addressed. Another example of knowledge area segmentation was a class near the end of the semester devoted entirely to preparation for the municipal exam the following day. The class revolved around a math task presented on the board. This task comprised four problems about shapes, fractions, and percentages students were to solve individually. There was no mention about the relation of these numbers to any other curriculum knowledge area.

Non test review classes in both classrooms also exhibited knowledge area segmentation marked by abrupt, disconnected transition between them. A March class in Salvador transitioned from math to Portuguese when Simone erased the board, wrote “Orthography,” said they’d begin Portuguese, and instructed students to cut out words in newspapers that reflected a particular orthographic rule. The task ended when she said Portuguese was over and wrote “History” and “The importance of documents” on the board. An additional indication of the separated treatment of curriculum knowledge areas can be illustrated with a May class that incorporated math, Portuguese, and science. Math was a review of six addition problems students had for
homework, Portuguese involved nearly three hours of reading and individually answering questions about a fable, and science took up the final half hour on the topic of ecosystems. The transition between math and Portuguese took place when Simone informed the class they’d look at a fable. The segue from Portuguese to science occurred following the final textbook question about the fable when Simone told students to open to a page in their science books.

Comparable divisions and transitions between knowledge areas were observed at Tucano. For one, all class tasks were presented on the board as either “Math Class Task” or “Science Class Task.” During the tasks math was not bridged with science or vice-versa. Secondly, when two knowledge areas were covered in one class, there were sharp transitions between each. For instance, an August class switched from math to science when Tânia said math was over and told students to get out their science books. Similarly, an October class involved 45 minutes of a math homework review on area measurements followed by three hours on the science topics of lice and human production. This transition was signaled when Tânia wrote the latter on the board. Another instance transpired in November when, after a student asked about studying science, Tânia replied they’d “do Math first because it has priority.” I discuss this priority in Chapter 8.

To supplement the above-noted observation patterns and to speak to the bridge between policy, curriculum, and contexts, Simone shared her perspectives why interdisciplinarity was not a characteristic of the enacted curriculum at Sabiá nor present in municipal school systems in general. First, she noted the influence of the disciplinary nature of textbooks on teaching. Second, she said that knowledge areas, tests, and the school system weren’t treated as interdisciplinary. She pointed out:
[Interdisciplinarity] has become a fad, people think it’s attractive, and to a certain extent it says that the way you teach is not correct, it’s bad. That you now have to work with themes and that the themes will traverse the disciplines . . . but teachers aren’t prepared to deal with this, the schools aren’t prepared to deal with this, the students aren’t prepared to deal with this. . . . Teaching is not oriented to this.

Simone continued with regard to the pedagogic projects of Sabiá:

The notion of united subjects without any separation is still a long way off. We work a lot with projects. For example, the school proposed one recently about the history of Sol. . . . This project is to be based around a theme. And through this you are to deal with the contents for each discipline. You are going to link the contents that you have to teach, that were defined for the bimester . . . but it isn’t like this. It remains very much on paper. . . . How am I going to teach math together with the history of the neighborhood? . . . This project doesn’t exist. And the people don’t think about this. People, that is, teachers, we all don’t think about this. . . . I think the municipal system plays around a lot with education. It plays around a lot in that everything is very beautiful on paper, but in practice it’s different.

On a related note, Simone contended that interdisciplinarity implied a radical change in pedagogical practice that she felt teachers, students, and schools were not prepared for or simply avoided or resisted. She explained that teachers either lacked the training to teach in interdisciplinary fashion and were not accustomed to thinking this way, were familiar with how to incorporate interdisciplinary practices but pretended that they didn’t know, or knew how but elected not to teach in this manner because it entailed more work. “It is more difficult to work
this way because you are going to spend more time preparing for class.” Simone added that interdisciplinarity also “changes the routine” as it represents a break from “book, chalkboard.” That is, covering the content in textbooks and presenting information on the board for students to copy. This point is further addressed in Chapter 8. Simone’s perspectives therefore divulge why there are contradictions between the concept of interdisciplinarity in curriculum documents and the realities of the enacted curriculum in schools.

**Superficial Knowledge Integration**

To further highlight the multiple layers of the sub-theme of (inter)disciplinarity, my observations also revealed that the above-described knowledge area fragmentation was not always black and white. Rather, just as other research has noted a spectrum of “shades” of phenomena such as teacher or student-centeredness (Niyozov, 2008; Tabulawa, 2004), there were varying degrees of knowledge integration. This was typified by what I term *superficial knowledge integration*. I’ve selected two accounts from each context to illustrate.

In one context, class began when the focus teacher wrote the agenda as science and the topic about water on the board. First the class read, listened to a song about and reviewed questions related to the “Planet of Water” poem. Then the focus teacher listed the names, location, and length of the five longest rivers in the world on the board. The only commentary on any of these occurred when the teacher asked the class where the Amazon is located and explained that most of it is in Brazil but that it starts in Peru. The teacher then assigned math homework in which students had to note the difference in the lengths of the rivers. On the one hand this task integrated science, geography, and math. Nonetheless, no map was used to locate these rivers, nor was there any mention of their environmental, social, political, historical, or
commercial importance, or their relation to the focus on the water theme. So, on the other hand, the way in which curriculum knowledge was engaged with reflected a segmented treatment of knowledge areas.

A second example from this school was a class on math conceptual categories of millions, thousands, and hundreds. Textbook problems about the population of different states and regions in Brazil were used to teach these categories. In this sense math was linked with geography. However, the task only required that students identify the numerical value of each digit in the population of 10,187,798 inhabitants of the state of Rio Grande do Sul. For example, students had to decide whether a particular number such as the first 1 represented 1 million or 10 million and whether the second 1 belonged to the category of a hundred thousand. In addition, there was no commentary on the significance of this population, urban population issues, interregional comparisons, or students’ realities.

Superficial integration tendencies were evident in my other research site as well. For instance, during a class early in the semester problems such as a pie graph showing the percentage of coffee production in different states challenged students to calculate the tons of coffee produced by each state. In this respect, parts of the task integrated math and geography. Nevertheless, there was no discussion of the reasons behind the coffee production differences across states.

Math problems later that month also crossed curriculum knowledge areas and bridged with societal issues. One was based on a government statistic that 2,621,300 residents in the Northeast didn’t have any sewage system in their homes. While math was linked with geography, science, as well as regional realities, there were no comments about what these statistics meant
nor any contextualization with issues present in students’ realities. Students only had to identify
the value of each digit. Engagement was restricted to just the numbers as opposed to the meaning
of the real world problem.

Several points can be gleaned from these findings on (inter)disciplinarity as they relate to
scholarly literature. First, pedagogic staff’s perspectives reveal differing conceptions of
interdisciplinarity in theory and practice across the research sites. Tucano staff’s assertion that
the curriculum for fourth and fifth-year classes was integrated centered on the contention that
curriculum knowledge areas or disciplines are interlinked. Except for the mention of teaching
math and science in relation to the environment, their discourse did not touch on bridging
societal themes with these knowledge areas. In contrast and, as noted in the sub-section on
knowledge area fragmentation, Simone at Sabiá explained why curriculum knowledge areas are
taught in “isolated” fashion and not integrated with societal themes. Participants’ perspectives
illustrate the varying interpretations of the concept of interdisciplinarity and, consequently,
different ways of making sense of its relation to curriculum, knowledge, and pedagogy. Their
comments thereby corroborate educational scholars’ observations about the range of conceptions
of interdisciplinarity in Brazilian education (Domingues et al., 2000; Thiesen, 2008). They also
support arguments that the tenet of interdisciplinarity in the PCNs is ambiguous (Domingues et
al., 2000; Macedo, 1999).

A second point is with respect to the organization of the curriculum and the engagement
with curriculum knowledge in classrooms. The stark boundaries between curriculum knowledge
areas in terms of teachers’ schedules in Tucano and the evaluations, reviews, and in-class
transitions in both contexts reflect strong knowledge segmentation in the curriculum. This
separation of curriculum knowledge into knowledge areas with clearly defined boundaries is representative of one aspect of what Bernstein (1971) conceptualized as strong degrees of classification. While classification refers to the organization and treatment of knowledge in the official curriculum, the curriculum organization by distinct knowledge areas at each school is also mirrored in the minimal degree of integration of these areas in the enacted curriculum.

This strong insulation between knowledge areas is noteworthy for various reasons. While the highly classified nature of school curriculum organization together with the fragmented or superficially integrated curriculum in classrooms is coherent with the disciplinary organization of the PCNs, it contradicts the conceptualization of an integrated curriculum called for in curriculum documents. Also, as Tânia’s comment about the “priority” of math intimates, this classification speaks to hierarchical relations among the knowledge areas. Bernstein (1971) wrote about this in terms of “status differences” in curriculum knowledge. He explained that certain knowledge is afforded higher status than others. Similarly, Giroux (1988) contends that the way knowledge is organized in the curriculum is connected with legitimacy. Such overlapping segmentation and differential status is in turn tied to the organization of national, municipal, and school exams by knowledge areas, as well as elements I address in Chapter 8: contradictions across decentralization and centralization policies, knowledge hierarchy, and associated accountability pressures.

In some instances, however, the divisions between curriculum knowledge areas and between the curriculum and society were not so clearly demarcated. Patterns of superficial knowledge integration in which two or more knowledge areas and a societal theme were bridged on the surface also emerged. This shows that interdisciplinarity was a characteristic of what
knowledge was engaged with, but disciplinarity characterized how and to what extent such curriculum knowledge was engaged with. That is to say, there were instances in which tasks bridged two or more curriculum knowledge areas and even connected these knowledge areas with a societal issue. Yet the focus only extended to a surface level as it did not include examination of the significance of information. Nor was there any linkage of, for example, the meaning of statistics with other knowledge areas or societal issues.

This superficial integration aligns with Freire’s (2000) description of a banking education. He elaborated that, while content may be based on reality, it becomes “petrified” by the manner in which it is engaged with. For instance, students memorize the capitals of states, yet without learning about the significance of a capital city for a particular state. Rather than conceptualizing curriculum knowledge as a process of inquiry, it is treated as a “deposit” that students receive from teachers and store (Freire, 2000).

Several parallels can be noted between Simone’s explanations for why interdisciplinarity is not a characteristic of the enacted curriculum and conclusions drawn by educational theorists. Namely, her perspectives together with patterns that emerged from my observations and the curriculum organization of both research sites uphold assertions that disciplinary curriculum paradigms and practices persist in Brazilian public schooling (Domingues et al., 2000; Macedo, 1998, 1999). Her comments also mesh with Beane’s (1995) observation that what are regarded as interdisciplinary curricula tend to center on disciplinary organizational features. What’s more, Simone’s critique of school projects supports Macedo’s (1998, 1999) arguments that the compartmentalized treatment of knowledge areas in the PCNs, together with how schools are
typically organized around such, make it difficult for teachers to integrate knowledge areas, and school and society.

Further, Simone’s insight that teachers resist interdisciplinary pedagogical practices due to the extra work and change of routines necessitated is also broached in literature. Substantial preparation time is something most public school teachers don’t have given their 40-hour (or more) teaching weeks and other responsibilities as Aranha and Buscato (2008) note. Such was the case with participants in my study. Bjork (2003) also documents that teachers in Indonesia are either unprepared for or unwilling to put in the time and effort required to implement a localized curriculum. As he and Domingues et al. (2000) mention, teachers tend to adhere to routines they are accustomed to. Such resistance also aligns with Santos’ (2002) points that the call for teachers to break with their teaching habits poses a degree of insecurity for them. I unpack the issue of routines more in Chapter 8.

Finally, Simone’s perspectives affirm the existence of an official–enacted curriculum disparity in Brazil. As Santos (2002) writes, there remains a major gap between the official and enacted public school curriculum there. In addition, the paper and practice contrasts Simone refers to are similar to Santos’ (2002) finding that the PCNs seem to have minimal impact on the enacted curriculum in public schools. Thus, given the disciplinary organization of exams and other facets of public schooling, an interdisciplinary curriculum requires a systemic rather than simply pedagogical change.
7.2 Contextualization

Interdisciplinarity must be understood in relation to an intertwined pedagogical tenet of the PCNs: transversality or contextualization. Contextualization refers to the linkage of the school curriculum with pressing societal realities (Brasil, 1997c). More specifically, issues in the form of national and local themes traverse not only school–societal boundaries but are also to be integrated across the curriculum knowledge areas (Brasil, 1997c; Macedo, 1998, 1999; Moraes, 2003). Contextualization is meant to replace the traditional disciplinary curriculum, which has been criticized for de-contextualizing and fragmenting knowledge as well as subjugating students’ lived experiences in favor of predetermined curriculum knowledge (Macedo, 1999). Contextualization was the second sub-theme of curriculum integration.

Curriculum Adapted to “Our Reality”: Students’ Realities, Experiences & Knowledge

The official national and municipal curricula convey that contextualization is predicated on integrating curriculum knowledge with local realities (Brasil, 1997a, 1997c; SEMEC, 2008; SMEC, 2006). They state that doing so entails incorporating students’ experiences and knowledge into the curriculum (Brasil, 1997a, 1997c; SEMEC, 2008; SMEC, 2006). This official curriculum discourse is consistent with the writings of critical educators who advocate that curricula integrate students’ lived realities and knowledge. For instance, contextualization is similar to Beane’s (1995) notion of curriculum integration and Portelli and Vibert’s (2002) description of a curriculum of life. For these scholars the realities of students’ daily worlds become the focal points of the curriculum. They along with M. A. Butler (1998), Giroux (1988), and Shor (1992) write about students’ experiences and their interlaced knowledge serving as the
basis for teaching and learning. Freire (2000) also elaborated about the importance of “generative themes” from students’ lives providing the foundation for the curriculum.

Paralleling this official curriculum and scholarly discourse, a sub-theme of integration that emerged from pedagogic staff’s perspectives was the importance of contextualizing the curriculum with their realities. Tiessa and Teresa stressed the significance of an official curriculum, but one adapted to “our reality.” Tiessa elucidated:

The National Curriculum Parameters serve as our foundation. They emerged from the need to guarantee a minimum core curriculum for all of the national territory. Our country is very large. . . . São Paulo, which is so distant, has another reality. There the curriculum is completely different. . . . We seek to raise awareness to ensure those minimum contents . . . but a minimum that is enriched with local peculiarities and community needs. More contextualized, taking into account the students’ social reality. She declared it was fine if teachers don’t strictly adhere to the guidelines because the most crucial matter is meeting students’ needs, which she defined as what students are “experiencing at that moment.” In a similar vein, Teresa clarified that schools in the municipal system follow the municipal curriculum guidelines, but that there are necessary gaps between this official curriculum and the enacted curriculum according to the reality of each school. Teresa stated:

Even if we wanted to we aren’t able to follow the official curriculum to the T. We follow it but there are always adaptations to our reality. A school in the city periphery is different from one in the center of the city, it’s different from a school located in a rural area. . . . We have to work in accordance with our reality.
Teresa and Tiessa mentioned Tucano’s practice of incorporating themes such as the prevalence of “violence in the neighborhood” into the curriculum as an example of such contextualization.

Tânia likewise talked about connecting the curriculum with local realities. “There is a general curriculum for Brazil but each region has a different reality to which the curriculum should be adapted.” Tânia discussed using the science textbook in this regard. “I try to connect it to their lives . . . so that they make a connection between this content and their lives. . . . I emphasize to them that science is about the world, ecosystem where they come from.” Tânia also argued that math “situation problems” are not only an effective way to help students grasp fundamental concepts, but that such problems most closely resemble the realities of the students’ world outside school.

In line with the notion of contextualization elaborated in curriculum documents, pedagogic staff in both contexts stressed that students’ lived realities, experiences, and knowledge should be incorporated into the enacted curriculum. Teresa conceptualized knowledge as information gained through experience and expressed that teachers should build on the knowledge students bring to class. Teresa remarked:

Knowledge is the information we have that we acquire through studies or experience.

Teachers . . . transmit contents to students, and I also think that teachers learn a lot from students, from students’ experiences. . . . This knowledge is transmitted simultaneously. . . . Students don’t arrive at school without any knowledge. They come to school with lots of knowledge.

Additionally, Teresa maintained that “students’ knowledge, their necessities, their difficulties, their social and family contexts” should be the foundation for teaching and learning.
Tânia also underscored the need to contextualize the curriculum by bridging it with students’ knowledge and experiences. She explained:

I choose content with this in mind. What is going to be meaningful in order to confirm what they know in practice. . . . So that they see that what they’ve learned outside school is directly related with what they learn in school. That school is going to include, organize, and deepen this life knowledge, this life experience that they bring.

Tânia related this with when she taught math concepts using money. “There are students who don’t know how to read, but they know how to calculate correct change, they know fractions, they know division, they know in practice, because they go shopping for their grandmother . . . they play games.” She felt this interplay between the curriculum and students’ knowledge and experiences was particularly important given students’ local realities, what she referred to as “their world.” Tânia said, “They have to have much greater resourcefulness and adaptability than us in order to survive. So, their life experience is very rich.”

Simone correspondingly talked about the knowledge students bring to class. She stressed that students have a vast wealth of knowledge and that such knowledge should be the “starting point” in the enacted curriculum. Simone stated:

Students bring previous knowledge to class. When we begin class it is always good to find out if the students already know about something so that we can use that as a starting point for the class. But sometimes it’s not possible.

As well, Simone asserted that the juxtaposition with students’ reality, experiences, and knowledge made the curriculum more meaningful. “[Knowledge] is not smoke, nor a cloud that passes by. Knowledge is something that remains. It’s not something you memorize.”
Two other Sabiá teachers, Sofia and Silvia, offered related perspectives. Sofia mentioned that she strives to use students’ experiences as a foundation for teaching and learning in her classes. For example, she said that she tries to build on their practices of buying things when teaching math concepts. Silvia talked about incorporating the reality of Sol into her classrooms and contextualizing curriculum knowledge in relation to their region. She held this was important given that knowledge students learn in school should be relevant to their lives.

My observations indicated that Tânia and Simone incorporated students’ knowledge to a certain extent in their classrooms. One pattern that surfaced from observations of Tânia’s classes was how she legitimized a plurality of knowledge construction strategies during math tasks. For instance, in an August class she clarified that students could find whatever “path” for solving math problems such as the following: “In the swimming school there are 80 students divided into four groups, each with the same number of students. How many students are in each group?” She asked one student who had drawn circles in four columns to explain his method. Tânia congratulated him and stated that the important point was his comprehension regardless of the strategy he utilized. Tânia similarly validated students as capable of teaching one another during a pair work task later that month. She encouraged them to use any strategy to solve the problems, and she prompted students to explain their solutions to a classmate.

Tânia also elicited what students knew about science topics on various occasions. For instance, the last half hour of a September class was devoted to the topic of plant reproduction. Tânia initiated this topic by asking, “What role do insects play in plant reproduction?” One student responded about insects pollinating flowers. Tânia then expounded on the process of pollination and subsequently challenged students to describe what was happening in a drawing in
their science textbooks. Various students stated that it showed bats spreading pollen and facilitating the plant reproductive process. Tânia next had students read one paragraph at a time out loud on the topic of domestic animals living on the streets. After each paragraph, Tânia offered commentary or raised questions. For example, she asked students who’d seen a dog or cat starving. Nearly all raised their hands. Tânia then informed them that it was their responsibility to preserve the ecosystem and allowed several students to share comments about dogs living on the streets before presenting the science homework.

Three episodes stand out from Simone’s classroom in Salvador. They also speak to an overlapping and subsequently addressed tension that Simone and other participants discussed. The first part of a March class was devoted to school improvement suggestions that she challenged students to generate, emphasizing that they too were teachers. Two suggestions they came up with were that students should receive a better morning snack and that they should all have their own textbooks. When one student made points that others disagreed with, Simone intervened that each person’s opinions should be respected. This portion of class concluded with Simone saying they’d now “do Math.”

Later that month students spent part of a class writing word definitions and sentences from their Portuguese textbooks. During this time two men entered the classroom to change the lights. After they left, Simone asked the class if they thought it was okay that the men did this during class. Most students shouted, “No!” Simone noted that their school didn’t have the money to take care of such matters. A male student exclaimed, “School for the poor!” This led to several students sharing thoughts. For example, one student talked about dances he’s learning that would
lead to a better future in which he won’t assault people. After providing space for a few students to share such comments, Simone instructed them to continue their textbook task.

A third account from Salvador occurred during the first part of a May class that was devoted to the knowledge area of geography. Simone began by referring to pages in the geography textbook about diversity in Brazil. She told the class that Brazil is a country of contrasts and asked students what this meant. Several students shouted, “Different.” Simone then commented on regional differences, read from the textbook, and asked the class whether there were problems in Brazil. She elicited points such as racism, prejudice, and violence from students. Simone added pollution to the list. She next mentioned that Salvador was the second noisiest city in Brazil and how much “lack of respect” there was. A few students commented on this, and Simone wrote what one of them said on the board, “The President doesn’t do anything!” Simone then called on a few students who had their hands raised. One student complained about the delay in the construction of the city subway system. Another griped about local politicians. Simone proceeded with having students read from and answer questions in the geography book.

Although both focus teachers accentuated the importance of building on the knowledge students bring to class, they also recognized that teachers tended to “underestimate” this knowledge. Simone asserted her students transmit knowledge in class and that they know even more than her, yet reflected that teachers haven’t sufficiently inquired into what students know. She added that teachers “don’t teach certain things because they assume the students won’t know, that they won’t be able to do it. You already do him a disservice. You already hold the student as incapable.” In similar fashion, Tânia acknowledged:
We have the tendency to underestimate what they bring with them from their world. Instead of taking advantage of, stimulating, and incorporating this, we destroy it. . . . We assume that these kids, they are not intelligent, they live in a world of shortage, of emotional and material shortage.

Participants’ points about the relevance of students’ experiences and knowledge with what they are taught in school align with critical educators’ rationale for incorporating students’ knowledge, experiences, and local realities into the enacted curriculum. Sofia’s and Tânia’s emphases on building on students’ life experience and knowledge when teaching math overlap insight from Saxe’s (1988) research on young candy sellers in Brazil. He highlights that the knowledge students gain through everyday experiences comprises complex concepts that provide platforms for school learning. As Freire (2000) noted, this interplay allows students to learn from yet also learn to question math and other knowledge in relation to themes from their lives. To paraphrase Banks (1993) and Sleeter and Grant (1991), students’ knowledge and lived realities serve as lenses through which they make sense of themselves, society, and what they experience in the institutional realm of schools. Therefore, critical theorists like Giroux (1988) contend that teachers can help students see “the political richness and social complexity of the interplay between what is learned in school and the experience of everyday life” (p. 53). Doing so legitimates students’ knowledge and experiences in the enacted curriculum (McLaren, 1998). This legitimization is important because it “affirms their lived experience and encourages their power to examine the world” (M. A. Butler, 1998, p. 108).

Critical educational theorists also contend that bridging curriculum knowledge with how students make sense of their lived realities increases the probability that students will do better in
and get more out of school. Sleeter and Grant (1991) write that such a connection means that students are apt to be more interested in and empowered by their school experience. Cornbleth (2000) declares that schooling has greater “credibility” with students when curriculum knowledge overlaps their knowledge and experiences. Bartolomé (1994) claims that students are also more likely to succeed in school if instruction integrates rather than subordinates their knowledge and ways of representing such.

Pedagogic staff’s perspectives on contextualization also show that they perceive the official curriculum as weakly classified and framed. Their views that the enacted curriculum should be integrated with students’ experiences, knowledge, and lived realities indicate that they see transparent boundaries between school and outside school knowledge. For them, curriculum knowledge transcends school walls. Participants’ standpoints are therefore congruent with Bernstein’s (1971) notion of weakly classified curriculum knowledge.

Pedagogic staff also feel they have the autonomy to build on students’ needs, knowledge, and experiences in the enacted curriculum. This locally forged conception of curriculum syncs with the notion of pedagogy outlined in the public school curriculum documents in Brazil. Pedagogy is conceptualized in the PCNs as dynamic and contextually distinct rather than a “standard or homogenous and identical intervention for all students” (Brasil, 1997a, p. 6). These notions of curriculum and pedagogy also coincide with scholarly literature about weak framing. As opposed to a highly prescriptive, predefined product for teachers to implement as Sleeter and Stillman (2005) describe California’s high school curriculum, weak framing means that teachers and students have autonomy to co-construct the curriculum (Bernstein, 1971). Banks (1993), Giroux (1988), and McLaren (1998) discuss facets of such locally determined curricula that are
co-constructed by students and teachers in classrooms. Their descriptions parallel the “dynamic” conceptions of curriculum by Portelli and Vibert (2002) and Tabulawa (2004). For Portelli and Vibert (2002), the curriculum is a “dynamic relationship among teachers, students, knowledge, and contexts” (p. 36). Tabulawa (2004) offers a similar view regarding the enacted curriculum, which he calls a “dynamic system” of co-constructed practice.

Pedagogic staff’s conceptualizations of the curriculum as weakly framed and classified are consistent with the discourse of critical educators on legitimacy. Numerous scholars profess that the knowledge, realities, and experiences of marginalized youth comprise legitimate curriculum knowledge. Freire (1998) wrote about the importance of teachers not underestimating but rather valuing students’ knowledge and experiences. Gandin and Apple (2002) document such legitimization in public schools in one city in southern Brazil. Wong and Balestino (2003) highlight that the inclusion of the knowledge and experiences of marginalized youth in public school curriculum in Brazil is a first in federal education policy.

Participants’ perspectives that curriculum knowledge be infused with students’ knowledge and lived realities are consequently compatible with this official national mandate. Such harmony between curriculum documents and teachers’ views of curriculum and pedagogy is also presented in Bjork’s (2003) study on teachers in Indonesia. There, both emphasize contextualizing the curriculum with local realities. What is particularly prominent in the urban periphery contexts of my research, however, is that participants’ conception of legitimate curriculum knowledge as locally forged and contextually relevant means that the lived realities of traditionally excluded communities are not considered peripheral but rather central to the curriculum in both sites. I unpack this in greater detail in Chapter 9. Second, as unveiled later in
this chapter, violence and other issues were cited by staff and incorporated in classrooms as
integral curriculum knowledge. Third, the national official curriculum call for municipal and
school determinations of legitimacy is echoed by pedagogic staff at Tucano and Sabiá. Valid
curriculum knowledge is conceptualized by participants for its relevance to local contextual
realities. Fourth, this relates to the extent of decentralized versus centralized control over the
curriculum. For Karlsen (2000), this entails the degree to which curricula are nationally
standardized or locally defined. This emphasis on curriculum contextualization according to
local realities contradicts centralization pressures I document in Chapter 8.

On the other hand, Simone’s and Tânia’s convictions that they underestimate students’
knowledge are relevant to the literature as well as to additional findings I depict in Chapter 8.
Such disregard for the knowledge students bring to school has been a characteristic of traditional
schooling with its over-reliance on transmitting predetermined “official” knowledge as critical
educators have observed (Apple, 1995; M. A. Butler, 1998; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 1998; Shor,
1992). To paraphrase McLaren (1998), curriculum knowledge is generally treated as
disconnected from students’ knowledge, experience, and lived realities. M. A. Butler (1998)
likewise maintains, “Too often the school is a place where these knowledges are ignored and/or
intentionally shut out” (p. 108). This is particularly so concerning the tendency to not validate the
everyday knowledge of lower socioeconomic class children (Sleeter & Grant, 1991). Moreover,
the knowledge of such students might even contradict how knowledge is taught in school as
Saxe’s (1988) study in Brazil revealed. This incongruence has been associated with the silencing
of students in the curriculum (Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 1998; Shor, 1992; Sleeter & Grant, 1991).
Curriculum Knowledge as Transformative

A second pattern of the contextualization sub-theme was Tucano pedagogic staff’s contention that curriculum knowledge should help students transform local realities. Telma stated that she tries to use texts that are relevant to students’ realities. She said that doing so facilitates the ease with which students can apply what they learn to real life situations. Similarly, Thaís argued that teachers should help students realize how their classroom learning can be utilized in the daily realities of their lives. A third teacher, Tatiana, considered the enacted curriculum to be a “two-way street.” She explained that this meant that teachers build on students’ knowledge and experiences while students apply what they learn in school to their realities. Furthermore, Tatiana held that it wasn’t sufficient for students to see the connection between what they’re learning and society. She expressed that they should also teach their families and neighbors what they’ve learned. Tatiana informed me that she encourages her students to spread what they learn about the harmful consequences of burning trash, a widespread practice around Triunfo.

Tiessa and Tânia spoke more directly to the societal transformation aims of curriculum knowledge. “We try to work so that this knowledge is actually the knowledge that our students need to grow, to form participatory and active citizens and even transformers of local and Brazilian society” (Tiessa). Tânia said that curriculum knowledge should not only help students learn to count and write, but also to “construct their way of living.” On this note she commented that math situation problems are not only “an easier way for them to comprehend fundamental operations” but that they “will raise their awareness about things outside school.” Tânia added that she strives to help students learn how they can “improve their world . . . to plant a seed so that they can sow and water this seed in their homes.” She summarized, “The objective of the
The curriculum . . . is in this integral sense . . . to be able to prepare them for a future that is better than today’s reality, because it’s not very good.”

Tucano staff’s perspectives are in consonance with those of critical educators. It is evident that they and critical educators such as Freire (1998), Giroux (1988, 2004), McLaren (1998), Sleeter and Grant (1991), and Vibert and Shields (2003) conceptualize pedagogy as a contextually rooted and political practice aimed at addressing and redressing societal issues. Giroux (2004) argues that pedagogy is not a standardized model of principles and practices but rather “must always be contextually defined” so that it addresses everyday issues in particular contexts (p. 37). Also, for critical theorists such as Giroux (1988, 2004), pedagogy is an attempt to prepare students for active citizenship and societal transformation. Freire (1998) likewise summarized that education “is a form of intervention in the world” (p. 91). These conceptions align with a central tenet of critical pedagogy: bringing about social justice and more democratic communities (Vibert & Shields, 2003).

In this political vein, Tucano staff’s perspectives speak to the directive, transformative, and empowerment aims of pedagogy and curriculum knowledge described in critical theory literature. Directive knowledge refers to the notion that curriculum knowledge should help students better understand connections between school and society (Giroux, 1988). McLaren (1998) adds that such knowledge becomes “transformative” as it helps “students participate in vital issues that affect their experience on a daily level” (p. 186). Critical educators likewise believe that schooling should empower students (Giroux, 1988, 2004; McLaren, 1998; Shor, 1992; Sleeter & Grant, 1991). For them this means helping students comprehend and change their surrounding realities. Sleeter and Grant (1991) for instance state that curriculum should be
integrated with students’ knowledge so that they learn to “take charge of their circumstances” (p. 66).

Tucano staff’s views of the transformative aims of the curriculum also parallel the strands of critical educational thought found throughout Brazil’s public school curriculum documents. They are especially congruent with the discourse about transversality/contextualization. As detailed in Chapters 5 and 6, the PCNs together with municipal and school curriculum documents call for the inclusion of social questions that facilitate the understanding and critical examination of reality in order to provide students with the opportunity to transform their lives and local realities (Brasil, 1997a, 1997c; SEMEC, 2008; SMEC, 2006).

**Superficial Contextualization**

Students’ knowledge, experiences, and lived realities were incorporated into the enacted curriculum in both research contexts. Two patterns disclose how such were engaged with. First, the focus teachers were the ones contextualizing curriculum knowledge. That is, teacher commentary predominated the mention of contextual realities. Class discussions in which students shared perspectives about such realities were rare. Also, the clarification of the relevance of curriculum knowledge to society was done by the focus teacher at one school. Second, students’ realities, experiences, and knowledge were not examined or questioned. Students were not challenged to express, for instance, how or why they made sense of societal realities in particular ways. As with superficial knowledge integration, more than one pattern could often be noted. The proceeding vignettes illustrate what I term *superficial contextualization*. In some cases they intersect earlier patterns cited along with the second theme I address in Chapter 8.
In one context violence, discrimination, and the neighborhood’s history were repeatedly addressed. One day the focus teacher wrote “problems of a heavily populated city” on the board and elicited examples such as violence from students. She then asked if they had heard what happened nearby the previous Saturday (seven men were killed by a gang with machine guns). Students knew about this and several commented about the prevalence of violence in and around their neighborhood. Without commentary, the teacher continued eliciting additional urban problems. A student said unemployment was a problem and, when the teacher asked him for a reason, he answered, “People don’t have any education.” A female student chimed in that black people were the ones unemployed due to prejudice and racism. Another student emphatically concurred and numerous others shouted points. However, rather than facilitating discussion, the teacher reverted to eliciting further problems and then initiated a textbook reading.

In another class, the focus teacher elicited who had suffered prejudice and discrimination. Various students shouted, “Me teacher!” Without hearing examples, the focus teacher told them to read the textbook definition of prejudice. She then shared some of her friends’ reactions to the neighborhood surrounding the school to illustrate prejudice. A male student related an anecdote that he overheard a man at a bus stop who said that their neighborhood “is only filled with miserable people.” The teacher then had two students read the textbook definitions for discrimination and racism before she commented about racist, prejudiced views in Brazilian society. A female student volunteered that she was mistaken for a beggar once. Next a male student shared a personal experience, the moral of which a classmate voluntarily paraphrased to the class: “He is embarrassed about where he lives.” The teacher asked students whether he should be embarrassed. Numerous students raised their hands but were not nominated.
The same focus teacher bridged a task with the surrounding community in a different class. The topic of the capital of Brazil came up. After clarifying that Brasília is the capital, the focus teacher contrasted planned aspects of Brasília with the illegal occupation that founded the students’ neighborhood. She continued that their neighborhood is a favela created through a land invasion and touched on the similarity between it and the poor “satellite” cities around Brasília. She concluded her commentary by telling the class they’d review the answers to the worksheet task. Students’ views were not heard.

Two other classes exhibited similar patterns with respect to environmental and health issues. After eliciting symptoms of and ways to prevent dengue fever, a grave health threat throughout Brazil, the focus teacher warned that the students’ neighborhood was at particularly high risk given its dense population, lack of basic infrastructure, and inadequate sewage and waste systems. Hence, she drew on students’ knowledge about dengue symptoms and preventive measures yet told rather than sought students’ opinions about why their neighborhood might be at risk. Later, for a “neighborhood improvement” homework assignment students ascertained residents’ perspectives about the most urgently needed neighborhood changes. Another health center was the most cited. The teacher then asked the class how many health centers there were in the neighborhood and where they were located. Several students complained that there was only one and that it only offered limited care. The focus teacher expressed dismay, stating that other towns had a similar number of residents yet had various health centers. Although neighborhood residents’ perspectives on acute community needs were integrated into class, there was no discussion about health centers or why there was only one.
Neighborhood violence was a topic broached throughout the semester in the other research site. One day the focus teacher asked students about using a neighborhood library. A few students responded that they only frequent the library during the day given the violence and crime such as rape at night. After eliciting information about students’ parents such as that approximately one third of them had a steady job, she emphasized that they could choose the good or bad path and mentioned a former student of hers who committed murder at their age. She asked them whether they thought schools were teaching people to become criminals. Students said, “No.” She then stressed, “I have an obligation to this neighborhood because I am educating you.” After this comment the class began reviewing a math task.

Later that month the focus teacher asked, “What interferes the most with your lives?” All students who spoke up said, “Violence.” Instead of prompting further elaboration, examples or an analysis of violence in their lives, the teacher made a string of comments about violence such as the many forms it takes. This portion of class ended with the teacher reminding students about the role of schooling in helping them become citizens capable of realizing societal changes before shifting to a planned task. During another class students shared that a boy they knew was killed the night before. The teacher said he used to be her student, and that he was very nice but didn’t want to study. She underscored the importance of studying if they wanted a different future and added, “You all have to take part in changing your reality.” Students’ voices were not heard. They were told to resume a math task.

Adolescent pregnancy was an additional local reality addressed in the enacted curriculum. For example, during one class the focus teacher elicited that most students had seen a pregnant 12-year-old. She mentioned the myriad responsibilities and costs involved in raising a
child and related these with the presence of “a lot of abandoned children who wind up becoming criminals.” She continued that she’d seen students of hers come to school drunk, clarified that the problem was that these kids weren’t being cared for or properly taught, and contended that these issues were part of education and becoming citizens. Students’ responses were not prompted. Students were instead instructed to read from their textbooks.

A related tendency was that one focus teacher told students the contextual utility of curriculum knowledge rather than challenged them to share how they perceived this connection. For instance, one day she read a letter addressing city problems. She asked students about garbage around their neighborhood and made an association between it, other pollution around the school, and health problems. Various students spoke up, but none was given the floor. The focus teacher instead emphasized the need for them to educate their community about the consequences of such pollution before transitioning to a planned task.

In a similar vein, health and vaccinations were the focus of the science portion of one class. Students were to bring their vaccination cards that revealed their vaccination history. The teacher read through one student’s card and pointed out that he had a vitamin A vaccination because his diet was probably lacking in this. She reiterated that the task objective was to raise awareness of the importance of vaccinations. She pointed out that some children die from sicknesses they should have received vaccinations for, as well as noted that many such illnesses were caused by insufficient infrastructure and pollution. She elaborated that this combination was common in poor countries like Brazil, but that the problem in Brazil isn’t just the poverty but the “unequal distribution of wealth.” Students’ views were not sought. Instead the class continued a planned review.
The same teacher also emphasized the relevance of math knowledge to society on various occasions. One instance occurred with a series of word problems that students were to solve in pairs. For example, one of them challenged students to use addition, subtraction, multiplication or division to figure out how many vans capable of holding 12 people each would be needed to transport a group of 70 people. She then nominated one volunteer to go to the board to show the rest of the class how he solved the problem using division. The teacher congratulated him and related that this problem was an illustration of how “math is nothing more than knowing how to solve problems that occur in real life.” She likewise mentioned reasons why they were studying percentages and fractions in other classes. For instance, she informed students they were learning percentages and fractions so that they could teach their families how to figure out interest rates on installments and avoid being taken advantage of. However, students were not challenged to express their perspectives on this bridge between school and society.

In spite of the goal of educating for citizenship and transforming local realities stated in the PCNs and municipal curriculum documents, my observations exposed that contextualization occurred nearly entirely by way of teacher commentary in both schools. As well, while there was repeated mention of incorporating students’ knowledge, experiences, and lived realities into the curriculum in each context, staff did not talk about critically examining them. I also did not note evidence of such in classrooms. Students were not challenged to investigate how their knowledge is shaped by their experiences, nor how their knowledge and experiences relate to societal realities. As a result, there was a lack of inquiry into and student articulation of how they make sense of the contexts of their lives in Sol and Triunfo.
These characteristics of superficial contextualization are incongruent with principles outlined in the curriculum documents. They are also at odds with critical educators’ conceptualizations of knowledge in the enacted curriculum as detailed in Chapter 2. M. A. Butler (1998) for instance argues in favor of teachers investigating how students explain reality in relation to their context. This entails students having substantial voice in the curriculum so that they can “interpret and articulate experience” (Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 1998, p. 220). It is worth re-quoting McLaren (1998) in this regard:

Teachers need to understand how experiences produced in the various domains of everyday life produce in turn the different voices students employ to give meaning to their worlds and, consequently, to their existence in the large society. . . . It is crucial, therefore, that educators address the question of how the social world is experienced, mediated, and produced by students. (p. 218)

Not only do critical educators maintain that students should be afforded opportunities to convey how they make sense of the connection between their knowledge, experiences and lived realities, they also champion the critical engagement with such. Scholars such as Banks (1993), Giroux (1988), McLaren (1998), McMahon and Portelli (2004), Shor (1992), and Vibert and Shields (2003) discuss the need for teachers and students to analyze the interrelation among students’ knowledge, experiences, and social realities to help them develop a more critical understanding of society. McMahon and Portelli (2004) along with Vibert and Shields (2003) for example write about the notion of student engagement from a critical perspective. For them, this means critically addressing issues such as violence in students’ lives. The engagement with such realities would include examination of and discussion about how these have been experienced.
and how students and teachers make sense of them. Freire (1998) similarly endorsed using students’ experiences as a gateway for discussion about issues and problems present in their realities. He referred to the resulting critical awareness as conscientização (Freire, 2000). This awareness can help students see how knowledge is socially and historically situated, constructed, and legitimated as McLaren (1998) notes. Student recognition of themselves and societal conditions as historically rooted is in turn deemed pivotal for students to identify how particular realities are forged, sustained, and can be changed (Darder et al., 2003; Giroux, 2004; Shor, 1992). Such curriculum contextualization in Brazil is portrayed in Gandin and Apple’s (2002) account of the Citizen Schools of Porto Alegre.

### 7.3 Conclusion

The overlapping patterns of (inter)disciplinarity and contextualization comprise one theme that emerged from pedagogic staff’s perspectives and my observations in two urban periphery municipal elementary schools. While Tucano staff felt interdisciplinarity and contextualization were characteristics of their curriculum, Simone asserted the opposite at Sabiá. To complement these views, my observations indicated that curriculum knowledge areas, local realities, and students’ knowledge were integrated, but only to a superficial degree.

Moraes (2003) and Wong and Balestino (2003) caution that the pedagogical principles of interdisciplinarity and contextualization imply that teachers transform their pedagogical practices. As Moraes (2003) notes, such practices conflict with teachers’ experiences in compartmentalized and de-contextualized curricula. However, scholarly literature does not document how the tenets of interdisciplinarity and contextualization play out in the curricula of distinct urban periphery contexts facing similar dilemmas. Similarly, scholarly research does not
sufficiently address why interdisciplinarity and contextualization are not enacted to the extent envisioned. There is no mention of degrees of interdisciplinarity and contextualization as I described. There is also an omission of how policies might serve as barriers to these tenets. After all, in spite of the fact that pedagogic staff’s theoretical views might align with official curriculum calls for the marriage of contextualization and interdisciplinarity, a host of factors constrain the enactment of these principles.

Third, neither the official curriculum nor literature unpacks the relations between students’ lived realities and the expectations placed on schools and teachers to not only bridge curricula with local contexts, yet to foster the transformation of such locales. Although there is discussion about the incorporation and critical examination of students’ realities, experiences and knowledge, it does not specify how teachers do so with regard to violence, drugs, gangs, and other issues prevalent in the urban periphery. Nor does scholarly literature document why such realities aren’t examined further or depict how they impact the curriculum. These perceived gaps are notable given that interdisciplinarity and contextualization comprise the theoretical backbone of Brazil’s public education system.

Nevertheless, my findings on the theme of curriculum integration only partially address my research questions of what knowledge is engaged with, and how and why it is done so in the enacted curriculum in each school. Chapter 8 outlines further inconsistencies between education policies and the curriculum. These contradictions are pivotal for understanding the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy nexus in municipal public elementary schools in the urban periphery of Brazil’s Northeast.
Chapter 8 – Policy & Curriculum Contradictions

This chapter presents the second theme that emerged from my research on what knowledge was engaged, and how and why it was done so in the enacted curriculum at Sabiá in Salvador and Tucano in Teresina. It describes and analyzes contradictions between policy and the official and enacted curriculum. It also reveals how these overlapped the sub-themes of (inter)disciplinarity and contextualization in Chapter 7.

8.1 Knowledge Mediation/Control

Official Discourse on Dialogical Curriculum

As part of a contextually rooted and oriented curriculum, a dialogical pedagogy is endorsed in national and municipal curriculum documents in Brazil (Brasil, 1997a; SEMEC, 2008; SMEC, 2006). Critical educators also favor a dialogical enacted curriculum. Darder et al. (2003) write that a dialogical curriculum rests on the premise that everyone produces knowledge. This recognition is central to the notion that the enacted curriculum is shaped by the dialogical construction of knowledge among students and teachers. As Freire (1998), Sadeghi (2008), and Shor (1992) explain, the dialogical construction of knowledge means that the teacher is not the sole transmitter of knowledge. Rather, pedagogy is regarded as the practice of creating “possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge” (Freire, 1998, p. 30).

The incorporation of and critical engagement with students’ experiences and knowledge are part of a dialogical enacted curriculum (Banks, 1993; Bartlett, 2005; Darder et al., 2003; Freire, 2000; Freire & Macedo, 1995; Sadeghi, 2008; Shor, 1992). Sadeghi (2008) maintains that a dialogical pedagogy centers on discussion of how students and teachers make sense of issues present in their lives: how they analyze and perceive local realities and lived experiences. Shor
(1992) for example describes classes in which he would pose problems relevant to students’ lives as a way to stimulate their responses and questions. These questions became the foundation for a dialogical curriculum “co-developed” by students and the teacher. Indeed Shor (1992) and other critical educational theorists like Banks (1993), Bartlett (2005), and Freire and Macedo (1995) argue that such discussion should serve as a vehicle for the creation of new knowledge.

This constructed knowledge in the curriculum is seen as having a directive or transformative function. That is, it is linked with its application to particular contexts in that students can use it to affect local realities. Various critical educators have written about this as outlined in Chapter 2 and revisited in Chapter 7 regarding my findings on contextualization (Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 1998; Shor, 1992; Sleeter & Grant, 1991; Vibert & Shields, 2003). For them, pedagogy is a contextually rooted and oriented application of knowledge.

**Pedagogic Staff’s Theoretical Views: “Mediators of Knowledge”**

Pedagogic staff’s theoretical views in both contexts align with these conceptualizations of classrooms as dialogical sites of knowledge construction. Teresa referred to teachers as “mediators of knowledge.” She differentiated between what she described as a former practice of transmitting knowledge to students and the present-day role of teachers as mediators “stimulating students to construct knowledge.” Teresa considered pair work essential whereby the one who “knows more helps the one who knows less.” Tiessa also emphasized the importance of student–student interactions in which “knowledge circulates” among students as they learn from and teach one another. Tiessa addressed the relation between this and citizenship:
We are forming citizens. . . . Knowledge is important for the student to grow as a citizen in the social context in which he lives . . . as an active social element in order to participate in this society that he is a part of.

Teachers’ beliefs in both contexts paralleled those of the Tucano administrators. For Tânia knowledge is not simply transmitted but rather is something to construct. She said:

Knowledge is you perceiving yourself as an axis of something much larger. . . . There are various ways of knowing . . . there are various paths to arrive at knowledge. . . . Each person has his own knowledge and so therefore the way each person constructs his own knowledge is different.

She cited a math task in which students used diverse strategies to construct and demonstrate their knowledge of the concepts of division and fractions. She said that allowing them to do so was important because how they make sense of things and learn depends on experience.

Telma and Tatiana also talked about knowledge transmission and construction in interactive classes. Telma contended there should be a “partnership” of learning and teaching between teachers and students. Similar to Darder et al. (2003), Tatiana stated that she transmits knowledge but also learns with students. “We bring a lot from them. And we take advantage of what they already know.” She added that students are more interested and want to share when something in class is relevant to their lives. This rationale is consonant with Cornbleth’s (2000) and Sleeter and Grant’s (1991) writings on curriculum contextualization as cited in Chapter 7.

Simone offered varying perspectives over the course of semester. In the first interview she informed me that the “function of the teacher is to transmit knowledge to students.” In contrast, in a later interview she referred to teachers as “mediators” and argued that classrooms
should be “dynamic.” For her this means knowledge is not just transmitted from teachers to students but rather among students. She reasoned that group work was effective in this respect as it enables students to learn from and teach one another.

_Teachers’ Perspectives on Practice: Knowledge Transmission & Control_

Nonetheless, as Niyozov’s (2008) study on teachers in Tajikistan unveils, teachers’ perspectives on their teaching practices may conflict with their theoretical stances. This was the case with several participants. Tânia reflected that she allows “very little space for them to discuss with one another.” She recognized that interactions are primarily from her to students so that classes would “flow better, to control the classroom.” She said that relaxing this control would “complicate” things. Tânia explained, “Perhaps I place the excuse on the large class size, there are 36 students in class . . . the class becomes too noisy if I let them talk with one another.” She continued that, although she didn’t like the single or double-file row seating, students “don’t know how to sit in groups” and they “end up talking too much.” Tânia shared an anecdote about a role play with money she introduced as a math activity. “The result was excellent.” However, she said other classes complained about the noise. As a result, she didn’t try the same activity with other groups of students she teaches. Tânia expounded:

As much as we’d like to say, there isn’t this two-way interaction, in reality there’s not. . . . This change of teachers interacting with students, learning with students is very noble, but we are still . . . that the teacher always knows more than the student. There should be two-way interaction. There are moments when there is, but there are times when there’s not. And I act like I know and they don’t.
Sabiá teachers offered further insight. Simone pointed out that everybody talks about student participation in interactive classrooms, but insisted this was “a myth.” She affirmed that the tradition of students as receivers of knowledge persists in Brazilian public schools and added that there “isn’t space for the student.” Simone explained:

Knowledge transmission. The teacher speaks, the students copy, copy what is prepared for them. There isn’t much student participation in this knowledge transmission. It is very difficult to break away from this, teacher–student. . . . Lacking in this transmission is knowing what students want to learn. The teacher teaches the abilities and contents that are already prepared in the PCNs. In spite of the fact that, when we do the pedagogic projects of the school, that the student will participate in [knowledge] construction . . . it remains very much on paper, it exists on paper but not in practice. . . . I think the student’s role is still oriented to just receiving. . . . We don’t consider the student as a participant . . . as a critical subject. . . . There is much authoritarianism. . . . The tradition of student as a mere spectator, receiver. . . . This student–teacher, teacher–student, this dialogue does not exist.

Interrelated with tradition, Simone spoke about routine, control, and what’s easiest. Simone recognized the role of teachers as “mediators” espoused in curriculum texts. She talked about how teachers should, for instance with respect to the transversal theme of peace, begin by finding out what all students think about peace. Contrary to this notion, Simone along with Sofia and Solana explained that knowledge mediation and group work were a break from the “routine” of what students were used to and entailed more work for teachers. Simone stated:
In reality we end up... doing what is easiest. It’s easier to go to the board and write what I want... It is difficult for you to try to control many heads in the classroom... So much so that the student as a scribe is a tradition in public schools, the student who only copies. He doesn’t understand what he copies. This habit of copying continues.

When the student copies, he is calmer.

Similar to Tânia, Simone expressed her concern about the class becoming “a commotion” because students “aren’t able” to work in groups. She too noted the number of students in class as a reason for single-file seating and individual task work. Simone reiterated that she hadn’t had the courage to “break from the routine.” She again acknowledged she was “doing what is easiest. It’s easier to tell students to be quiet and get to work on a task instead of taking advantage of the student’s moment... to create space for debate.”

Simone also cited a resource matter in connection with the ongoing tradition of students as scribes. As I witnessed on numerous occasions and, as they in fact joked about, teachers at Sabiá sometimes spent 30 minutes or more trying to make copies of in-class materials for students. This is because the school did not have a photocopy machine but rather a mimeograph. Simone commented to me in the teachers’ room one day that the lack of a copy machine along with the poor (at times illegible) text quality produced by the mimeograph is why she writes on the board so much. She clarified it is easier and less time-consuming to do so.

Teacher control was therefore a defining characteristic of the enacted curriculum in each context. As staff commented, this control coincided with knowledge transmission practices and minimal space for dialogue. These staff perspectives are echoed by critical theorists regarding curriculum standards. Writing on the standards movement in the United States, Apple (2006) and...
Ohanian (1999) depict the associated conception of curriculum knowledge as information for teachers to transmit. Giroux (1988) notes that this view of knowledge is “accompanied by top-to-bottom classroom social relationships” and teacher control (p. 14).

Literature from Brazil and elsewhere documents a tradition of such teacher–student knowledge transmission. In the Brazilian context Freire (2000) wrote about a banking education in which “students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” of knowledge (p. 72). Domingues et al. (2000) recognize a continuing tradition of teacher–student knowledge transmission in Brazilian high schools. They not only link this tradition with the emphasis on standardized exams. They argue that both are counter to the principles of interdisciplinarity and contextualization.

Similar traditions are exposed in literature from southern Africa and the United States. Tabulawa (1997) provides a detailed account of the historical roots and rationale for ongoing “teacher-centered” and “authoritarian” pedagogy in Botswana primary schools. In line with participants’ comments about not providing space for student discussion, scholars in the United States write about such practices limiting students’ voice and negating them as constructors of knowledge (Britzman, 1989; M. A. Butler, 1998; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 1998; Shor, 1992; Sleeter & Grant, 1991). Britzman (1989) addresses the notion of curriculum as the “struggle for voice,” which is relevant to subsequently mentioned dilemmas such as the expectations for teachers to teach content within set timeframes. Shor (1992) contrasts participatory classrooms in which students have significant voice with traditional classrooms dominated by one-way “teacher talk.”
Simone volunteered additional points about knowledge mediation versus control. She explained that it was difficult to “know how to put into practice” the espoused interaction theories. She mentioned how the PCNs portray “en vogue” views of teachers as “mediators” yet countered, “Teachers don’t know how to do this.” She said that if students begin talking in class she silences them. Simone juxtaposed this by paraphrasing what the PCNs propose, “The teacher is not the sole source of knowledge. . . . Students also construct knowledge. The teacher’s role is to facilitate interaction with this knowledge.” She admitted that she shouldn’t just tell students about slavery for instance. “I have to try to find out the knowledge that they have.”

The quieting of students to control the classroom is mentioned in educational literature. Giroux (1988), McLaren (1998), and Sleeter and Grant (1991) write about the silencing of students’ voices. Yet Simone’s observations that teachers don’t know how to act as mediators and facilitate interactive classes are strikingly absent from literature on the enacted public school curriculum in Brazil. Literature does not underline connections between enforcing control and silencing with the recognition that teachers aren’t prepared for implementing the pedagogical practices outlined in curriculum documents. This finding thus raises awareness of how and why certain knowledge is engaged with in relation to interdisciplinarity, contextualization, and patterns described in this chapter.

A final point that emerged from teachers’ perspectives of their teaching and contradicted their theoretical views was that students perceive teachers as the transmitters of knowledge. Simone expressed her belief that everything that students say should be valued, and that the teacher is there “just to intervene.” In spite of this, she felt it was going to take a long time for this tradition where the “student recognizes that the teacher isn’t the owner of truth” to end.
Tucano teachers supported Simone’s view. Thais said that the teacher is regarded as the “owner of truth” and the “one who knows everything.” A few of her colleagues added that students expect teachers to write information on the board for them to copy and, if it is a class task, they will do nothing until the teacher reviews the answers. Tânia contrasted this student dependency on the teacher with her philosophy of teaching: “There has to be room for the student to have autonomy.” Such student perceptions of teachers as the sole knowledge possessors and transmitters is covered in educational literature (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990; Tabulawa, 1997). Tabulawa’s (1997) research revealed this to be the case in Botswana schools where students saw their roles and responsibilities as receiving knowledge from teachers.

Thais and Tânia talked about changing how they teach in this regard. Thais maintained that teachers should demonstrate that they are learning with students and encourage students to “question what you are saying” to break the notion that teachers are the “owners of knowledge.” However, she acknowledged, “For better or worse, traditional pedagogy continues.” Tânia similarly expressed that teachers should challenge students to think and not give them answers, yet recognized that teachers still adhere to the notion that they know more than students. “We think we know that authority doesn’t mean authoritarian. And we end up acting with authoritarianism. . . . They don’t need yelling at, they need help.”

8.2 Predetermined Curriculum Knowledge & Pacing

“Follow the Script”

Pedagogic staff in each context deemed the PCNs as helpful, flexible pedagogic guidelines for the formulation of locally relevant municipal and school curricula. For instance, Samara remarked that the PCNs guide the pedagogic practice of Sabiá and enable them to note
where they need to improve. Simone said, “The PCNs are not an ingested, closed curriculum.” She elaborated that teachers have the autonomy to make the curriculum relevant to their students.

Comparably, Tiessa and Tânia in Teresina conveyed that the PCNs are the foundation for what and how they teach. Tiessa conceptualized the PCNs as an “orientation”:

There is no legislation obligating us to follow the PCNs. It is an orientation given to Brazilian schools. . . . We embraced the PCNs when they arrived. . . . The moment they arrived we began . . . to analyze the PCNs, and to see their actual validity for us . . . and to try to make this adaptation to our work here in this school.

Tânia mentioned that the PCNs help teachers understand what to do, how to do so, and why. She thought it was important to have a “national standard” yet “with flexibility.” Tânia stated:

The curriculum is flexible. It’s as though it were a guideline for what students should learn for each grade. And from this guideline, you can teach more or not . . . it depends on your classes and the students’ learning. Sometimes everything is there in the curriculum and sometimes not. . . . Sometimes students haven’t learned the base they are supposed to for that year level. The teacher will have to teach something that students should have learned earlier. Teachers need to have the sensibility to see this too. It’s not just about meeting the curriculum requirements. I have autonomy within the PCNs to add or take out some things.

Pedagogic staff’s conceptions are consistent with the discourse in the official national and municipal curriculum documents as detailed in Chapters 5 and 6. Their understandings are also congruent with analyses of the PCNs (Domingues et al., 2000; Fischman et al., 2003; Gvirtz,
As well, their views of the PCNs as an open reference instead of a standardized prescription gel with Bernstein’s (1971) notion of weak framing. While the PCNs were seen as flexible guidelines in both contexts, Tânia, Tatiana, and Simone asserted that there isn’t a gap between what they teach and what the PCNs specify should be taught. Tânia shared the case of a student in her class who arrived in the middle of the year. This student said that she was studying the same content in Teresina that she had been studying at a municipal school in Brasília. Tânia also assured me that Tucano was teaching the same content as schools in São Paulo. In a similar way, Tatiana told me that Tucano’s curriculum “is in accordance with the PCNs. And we try as much as possible to follow the curriculum.” Simone remarked that the PCNs outline everything that teachers are supposed to teach:

We follow a curriculum that it already determined. Even the textbooks, they are based on these PCNs. We follow this, we follow the already made curriculum . . . because there is a law that tells you what you must do in order for students to achieve. . . . So, you must follow those PCNs.

Thaís and Simone brought up tests in reference to this. “If we don’t follow this scheme, when the test comes around . . . if most of the students do poorly it is because the teacher isn’t following the curriculum” (Thaís). Thaís commented that the evaluations are based on both the PCNs and the municipal guidelines. She referred to this connection as the “quality that I have to guarantee.” Simone shared a related perspective. She informed me that teachers are pressured to teach and test the same content. She disagreed with this as she felt students should be assessed based on what they learn in each classroom.
Simone and Thaís also cited the influence of textbooks. Simone declared, “The majority of knowledge that we utilize is from the textbook.” She noted that teachers tend to teach something “because it’s in the textbook.” She continued that teachers often just have students complete textbook exercises while disregarding other practices. Thaís offered further insight. She told me Tucano administrators have questioned her when she’s taught content not found in the textbook. This contradicted Tiessa’s assertion:

The teacher’s planning is not based on the textbook. It is an important material that students have . . . but it isn’t the principal reference for planning. Teachers don’t follow the textbook. The textbook is only a resource that teachers can use.

Finally, and to bridge points in this and the previous section, Simone contended that teachers have become accustomed to doing what is easiest: using the textbook and writing information on the board. She stated:

I have this preoccupation about making room for students to talk. But . . . there is another matter. I have to stick . . . to the curriculum that is proposed, even if the students don’t learn. This is my biggest concern and biggest problem, to teach the contents that are proposed. . . . I don’t agree with this.

She described her teaching in this regard as “traditional”:

The teacher selects contents, transmits content. . . . It’s easiest to follow the traditional way. . . . Sometimes you want to innovate, to have students work in groups . . . but I’m concerned about the classroom becoming a chaos, that they’re not learning such and such, wasting time.
Simone associated this transmission of content with accountability. “You are always being held accountable, you have to fill out lists of abilities that you’ve taught, whether you’ve taught that ability, regardless of whether the student has learned or not. You have to follow the script.”

Pedagogic staff’s standpoints speak to why particular knowledge dynamics occur in municipal public school classrooms in Brazil’s Northeast. Their views of having to “follow the script” and the curriculum as “already determined” also correspond with critical educators’ contestation of the worldwide trend of curriculum standardization. Apple (1995) used the term “predetermined” to refer to what he addressed as problematic notions of curriculum knowledge reduced to “prepackaged” curricular materials and the pedagogical process as “prespecified.” Giroux similarly (1988) employed the term in reference to the expectations that teachers follow “predetermined content and instructional procedures” (p. 124). Both scholars connect these expectations with curriculum standardization and a de-professionalization of teaching.

More recently, authors have written about related trends in Canada and the United States. Wien and Dudley-Marling (1998) profile the standards movement in Ontario in the 1990s. They argue that the focus on meeting predetermined outcomes meant that teachers were conceived of as technicians for imparting knowledge while students’ roles were envisioned as “receptacles” of such knowledge. In a similar vein, Rodriguez (2006) holds that, due to science curriculum standards in the United States, the enacted curriculum has become a “pasture.” This pasture refers to students’ “uncritical grazing” on knowledge presented in the official curriculum (p. 804). Sleeter and Stillman (2005) analyze curriculum standardization in California, which they contend indicates attempts of standardizing pedagogy and curriculum knowledge. As well,
Berlak (1999) maintains that even allegedly open-ended curriculum guidelines establish pedagogical and knowledge boundaries by stating what is and isn’t legitimate.

Arguably more representative of the Brazilian context, Gvirtz and Beech’s (2004) article on Argentina’s decentralized/centralized education system reveals contradictions similar to those mentioned by my research participants. They point out that the national “common basic contents,” while meant to serve as guidelines, have been perceived by teachers as “the curriculum they had to follow” (p. 380). These authors also note the major influence of textbooks and exams on teaching. They disclose how these and other elements sustain the “centralized logic” of the system, one that has overridden the intended decentralized curriculum reform. I revisit this point about Brazil later in this chapter.

“Content Race”

Simone talked about another pressure, one interrelated with following a predetermined curriculum and the tension between knowledge mediation and control. She elucidated that she was not only expected to cover predetermined content, but that she had to do so within a particular timeframe. Simone called this a “content race”:

Time pressures me . . . you can’t stop for something because you have to keep going. . . .

There is a content race. Portuguese is over. Tomorrow there is something else. Afterwards something else, then I’m going to give different content. I am switching rapidly . . .

students aren’t learning anything.

Although teachers were responsible for planning their classes, Simone said that the administration decided the pacing of teaching. Teachers of the same year level were also
compared in terms of who had taught what by a certain point. Thus, as Simone put it, “it’s something that forces you to run.”

Simone expressed her confusion and frustration concerning this pressure:

I did not teach the contents the way I wanted. . . . If a student did not learn something, how am I going to teach something else that depends on something he was supposed to have learned? . . . But I have to provide a return to the school administration, that I am teaching content. . . . I’m sort of lost this year . . . for me the objective is not to fill students with content.

She said there are “students who are not able to keep up” but reiterated, “I am going to follow the script, the contents that are already defined.”

This pressure to teach the predefined curriculum at a certain pace is cited in scholarly literature. Britzman (1989) addresses the conventional view of curriculum as material to cover within time periods. It is also similar to a point Bjork (2003) makes: While teachers in Indonesia are instructed to create curricula and use “student-centered” methods, they are also evaluated according to a “behavioral checklist” (p. 205).

The content race was evident in my observations of Simone’s and Tânia’s classes. The typical daily agenda in each classroom entailed a homework check and/or review, a topic introduction, individual or pair work tasks for students to copy from the board or complete on a worksheet, a task review, and transition to another knowledge area or homework. Three examples from each context illustrate how the “content race” overlapped “follow the script,” knowledge control, knowledge area segmentation, and superficial contextualization.
After presenting an individual task to complete in class, the focus teacher mentioned the “discovery” or “finding” of Brazil. A male student exclaimed, “It was an invasion!” Students were then instructed to begin the task. The following month the focus teacher began a class by asking what happened in the neighborhood over the weekend. A few students mentioned a fight between gangs. Without further comment, she previewed the two topics for that day, one for each knowledge area. She next instructed the class to read from their textbooks, summarized the main ideas without hearing from students, and assigned questions for students to complete individually. A third instance occurred at the end of the semester. The focus teacher reminded the students about a school exam and assigned a task in preparation. A few minutes later she stated that one of the boys killed in the neighborhood weekend shootings was a former student of hers. A student blurted out, “Neighborhood of terror!” Another student remarked that this violence could happen to anybody. As before, students were instructed to finish their task.

Similar patterns were evident in the other school. After spending over three hours on a textbook and worksheet task one morning, the focus teacher transitioned to another knowledge area by summarizing what they had studied about one topic and introducing the next. Students then read out loud from their textbooks, and the teacher summarized after each paragraph. Except for students’ reading, her voice was the only one heard. A class later that semester began with a review of homework. The focus teacher closed that segment by telling students they’d have science after the break. After watching a film and reading a text on the topic, the teacher noted the main points and implications. Students’ perspectives about the film and text were not heard. A final example occurred when the focus teacher assigned math problems. There was no
connection with other curriculum knowledge areas or local realities. In fact she told students she preferred to teach fractions in more practical ways but that they’d be tested in this manner.

Patterns presented in the first two sections of this chapter highlight what knowledge was most legitimate in the enacted curriculum as well as valid ways of engaging with such knowledge. They signify clear divisions between school and everyday knowledge. In this sense they reflect characteristics of strong classification explained by Bernstein (1971) and Scott (2008). The prioritization of transmitting predetermined curriculum knowledge over the knowledge and experiences students brought to class was part of this strong classification. For example and, to overlap a finding presented in Chapter 7, the comments about a “school for the poor” and the Portuguese invasion of Brazil epitomize how only the tip of the iceberg of how students made sense of reality surfaced. This tendency coincides with research by critical scholars such as M. A. Butler (1998) and McLaren (1998) who note that students’ knowledge and lived experiences are often neglected in the curriculum.

Teachers’ views together with my observations and subsequently addressed points also uncover why such knowledge hierarchy and knowledge dynamics persist. Observed patterns and teachers’ conceptualizations of their practices were incompatible with teachers’ theoretical views. For instance, teachers’ commentary about the pressure to “follow the script” contradicted their conceptualizations of participatory classrooms in which contextual realities along with students’ knowledge and lived experiences are incorporated as legitimate curriculum knowledge. This supports Cornbleth’s (2000) observation that such a preordained curriculum disregards students’ experiences and knowledge. This contrast is significant as it speaks to why contextualization
occurred to a superficial yet not deeper, more critical extent. It likewise indicates why knowledge areas were taught in a fragmented way and within predefined time constraints.

Further, although Brazil’s public elementary school curriculum appears far from standardized, participants’ views on classroom realities differ from the official curriculum discourse about schools and teachers having autonomy to create their own curriculum. Teachers’ points about having to follow a “predetermined” curriculum at a certain pace together with the influence of tests and textbooks reflect features of standardization. Their standpoints also reveal that the educational rationale for decentralized schooling are not the reality. While municipalities and schools are granted greater autonomy on paper, they are also held accountable for implementing policies and following guidelines conceived at the national level (Azevedo, 2002). Teachers’ perspectives thereby suggest that the weak framing in the PCNs is misleading. The following sections illuminate this.

8.3 “Makeup”

“Masked Knowledge”

An overlapping finding was that math and Portuguese are the most important knowledge areas in the curriculum. Tânia and Simone clarified that only math and Portuguese are evaluated on national and municipal exams and determine which students progress to the sixth year of schooling. For example, Tânia said 12 of her fifth-year students wouldn’t pass elementary school and progress to middle school due to their poor text interpretation and writing in Portuguese.

This status difference influenced teachers’ teaching. Tânia stated that she followed the official curriculum more for math than science. Sara and Silvia remarked that their students do math and reading every day, whereas Sara taught geography, history, and science only once a
week. Simone maintained that other knowledge areas “are becoming unimportant.” She stated, “I know it’s not important for a student to understand his culture/origin, then why will I teach history? I know that teaching about the environment isn’t important. . . . Geography maps, if he knows, great, if not it doesn’t matter.” Simone saw all of this as “masked knowledge”:

Curriculum knowledge areas are treated as equal on paper, however, in reality only math and Portuguese matter.

While Tânia claimed that the tests did not affect how she teaches, she made repeated comments about math tests in class. This commentary surfaced early in the semester when, in September, she informed students they’d review between then and their school exams and a national test in October. Later that month she reiterated that the in-class tasks and homework were a review for the school exams and that they were practicing the types of questions they’d see on the national Ayrton Senna Institute exam. Tânia also told students that this exam would reveal the level of Teresina municipal schools in comparison with the rest of Brazil, that it would indicate students’ “level of learning,” and that it would highlight what she needed to teach more. The commentary continued in the second half of the semester when she told me a math review task was taken from the 2007 municipal exam and, the following day, reminded students that the assigned problems were in preparation for the municipal and school exams at the end of the year. Another day she informed students they’d “do math” instead of science because “it has priority.” Finally, she noted that the municipal math exam would reveal Tucano’s ranking among Teresina schools and stressed that she’d taught everything that was to be on the test.

These comments bring to light telling characteristics about curriculum knowledge in both contexts. The priority given to Portuguese and math shows that certain knowledge is considered
superior to others in school curricula. As Apple (2003, 2004) and Cornbleth (2000) remind us, only some knowledge is declared truly valid or “worthwhile” in schools. The acquisition of such legitimate knowledge “becomes the structuring principle around which the school curriculum is organized and particular classroom social relations legitimated” (Giroux, 1988, p. 89).

The emphasis on exams also reinforces their legitimacy at the expense of knowledge derived from how students make sense of their lived realities. As Rodriguez argues (2006) and, as Simone touches upon in this and the following section, the greater devotion to certain knowledge on tests means that students aren’t challenged to demonstrate “how such knowledge impacts on or is relevant to their daily lives” (p. 804). This finding is consistent with educational literature about the tendency of subjugating students’ knowledge and experiences in the curriculum (M. A. Butler, 1998; Cornbleth, 2000; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 1998; Sleeter & Grant, 1991). It also lends evidence to a subsequently addressed point that Santos (2002) makes about a tension public school teachers in Brazil face: between preparing students for standardized exams and critically engaging with societal issues.

This status differentiation of curriculum knowledge contradicts the official curriculum. In spite of decentralized curricular and pedagogical autonomy and the official curriculum rhetoric that knowledge areas, transversal themes, and students’ knowledge, experiences, and lived realities are equally legitimate, math and Portuguese are clearly the most important. The supremacy of Portuguese and math over other knowledge areas and students’ knowledge is at odds with the tenets of interdisciplinarity and transversality. It reflects a disciplinary official curriculum paradigm in Brazil in which themes based on societal issues are afforded lower status than traditional knowledge areas (Macedo, 1998, 1999).
This curriculum knowledge hierarchy also intersects aforementioned sub-themes. It can be associated with the extent to which curriculum knowledge is “predetermined.” Teachers’ comments suggest that what knowledge was to be transmitted was, in many instances, already decided. As Tânia shared with me, the focus of teaching math was predominantly a review via test preparation tasks designed by the teacher. The hierarchy of Portuguese and math over other knowledge areas and local realities also reflects knowledge area segmentation and aligns with Bernstein’s (1971) concept of strong classification. This data helps explain the disciplinary pedagogical practices portrayed in Chapter 7.

Such legitimacy and hierarchy can also be linked with conceptions of educational quality. That is to say, public school quality in Brazil is informed by standardized math and Portuguese exam results (Aranha & Buscato, 2008; Bencini & Minami, 2006; IBGE, 2008; Oliveira, 2004; Schwartzman, 2004). Quality is therefore explicitly pegged to quantitative criteria and to particular knowledge areas. A vital realization then is that knowledge hierarchy and knowledge area fragmentation are inherent in official notions of public school quality. They are also foundational to the extensive ranking system, which is riveted to quality indicators spanning national to municipal levels. This is a noteworthy paradox since measures of school quality appear to be detached from and inconsonant with the principles of interdisciplinarity and contextualization touted in the official curriculum.

Quantitative Quality & Rankings

An array of figures and rankings symbolize related accountability pressures and quantitative notions of public school quality in Brazil. A number of authors have expressed concern about this accountability trend. On a global level, Broadfoot (2000) addresses the
growing obsession with standardized testing and rankings in relation to international educational and economic market competition. Fischman et al. (2003) write about this phenomenon in Latin America. They explain that ministries of education in the region have initiated policy and curriculum changes in line with performance-based rankings. Tatto (1999) profiles how accountability mechanisms such as tests and textbooks help the federal government maintain control over Mexico’s public education system amidst decentralization policies. Valente and Arelaro (2002) describe this approach in Brazil regarding the intertwined evaluation and ranking system across national, municipal, and school levels.

Tiessa spoke to accountability as she showed me forms Tucano has to submit to SEMEC. These include attendance and homework charts, which students have literacy issues, and the number of pedagogic staff meetings held. Monfredini (2002) documents similar tendencies in her fieldwork in municipal schools in São Paulo. According to Tiessa, this data informs SEMEC what happens in the enacted curriculum and is used to compare schools within the municipal system. SEMEC then sends this information to the Ayrton Senna Institute in São Paulo, which then publishes comparative data of municipal systems in Brazil. For Tiessa, the Institute carries out an “instrumental” role in the “monitoring of pedagogic practice in the schools.”

Other participants in my research contested this pressure. Samara called attention to realities shaded underneath the bridge between municipal secretaries of education and schools. She pointed out that Sabiá didn’t have updated municipal curriculum guidelines. Samara wondered, “How is it that we can hold teachers responsible for something that they don’t even have in their hands?” Tânia expressed resistance to completing municipal information sheets:

Why am I wasting time filling out that form if students don’t even care about the
homework? . . . Just because the Ayrton Senna Institute demands this information from SEMEC. It’s only because of this. But what purpose does it serve, that student profile that indicates a student didn’t do homework?

She and students deemed it unfair to display their names and records at the front of the classroom. Tânia also felt punished since she had to stay in her classroom outside class hours while students completed the homework. She concluded that a deeper analysis of this issue and its relation to other matters such as the lack of parental participation is needed.

Tucano staff insisted that municipal education systems are most concerned with numbers. Several teachers viewed quantitative indicators as “makeup” that don’t display qualitative realities. Tatiana declared, “SEMEC doesn’t want to know how you teach, they just want to see the results.” Tânia commented that she was questioned by the administration after only 6 out of 36 students in one of her groups answered a question about fractions correctly on the Ayrton Senna Institute national math exam. She explained that was why she re-taught fractions later in the semester. Thaís elaborated more about accountability to SEMEC and what she worded as the emphasis on “quantity” at the expense of “quality.” “Every day we confront the pressure of being the best in the Northeast.” She added that teachers are held accountable for yielding the desired figures and that SEMEC will question Tucano’s numbers if they do not meet SEMEC’s targets. She concluded, “Either you obey the system, or you are swallowed by this system.”

Tânia and Tiessa touched on the prominence of the SEMEC Portuguese and math exams for fifth-year students and their connection with rankings and funding. Tânia said that these exams are used to rank each school in the municipal system and each system in the country.
Tiessa elucidated that the exams not only enable SEMEC to rank schools according to categories such as A, B, and C, but that schools with higher scores receive financial rewards from SEMEC.

Simone shared additional perspectives on the relations of test scores, rankings, and competition. She problematized the obsession with the test scores. She said the scores imply that students are doing well, “but in reality they aren’t.” Simone said her school was proud of such quantitative gains, but she questioned what had improved. She described the education system as “masked” and “for outsiders to see,” meaning that things aren’t as rosy as they appear. Simone continued that the IDEB rankings, based on how many students pass and their scores on the Brazil Exam, are linked with competition. “There is a competition between schools. One wants to be better than the other.”

Brazilian educational scholars also write about this linkage between rankings, competition, and funding that Tânia, Tiessa, and Simone referred to. Since municipal funding in Brazil is linked with IDEB rankings, there is inequitable distribution of resources among municipalities (Azevedo, 2002; Valente & Arelaro, 2002). Schools end up competing with one another for resources as a case from the state of Pernambuco reveals (Azevedo, 2002). As well, there are connections among financial rewards, quantitative quality indicators such as reduced per-pupil expenditures, and elevated rankings (Valente & Arelaro, 2002).

Pedagogic staff’s perspectives are in accordance with critiques in educational literature about quantitative conceptions of quality. One criticism is that such notions of school quality are not only illusory, but that they also disguise qualitative facets. Aranha (2008) and Sands (2008) have written about this in their profiles of infamous cases in Brazil’s Northeast. Others maintain that the conception of education as an investment measured by rates of return, input, and output
disregards everyday classroom realities (Arnove, 1997; Klees; 2008; Samoff, 2003a; Schiefelbein, 2004; Schugurensky, 2003). For example, funding programs and standardized exams in Brazil have been criticized for diverting attention from teaching and learning conditions needed to improve the quality of education (Kempner & Jurema, 2002; Santos, 2002; Tarabini, 2008). Kempner and Jurema (2002) refer to this focus on quantitative aspects as a “brick and mortar solution to educational problems” (p. 243).

Moreover, scholars identify contradictions between the focus on numbers and the call for dealing with urgent societal issues. Kempner and Jurema (2002) contend that the emphasis on quantitative indicators “ignores the interrelationship of the daily lives of students in the streets and in the schools” and inhibits the “ability of teachers to mediate the lives students face outside the school” (pp. 343-344). On a related note, Santos (2002) points out conflicting elements between exams like the SAEB and the purported schooling aim of addressing societal issues. She argues that, due to the accentuation on the former, the endeavors of teachers to engage with local realities along with the conditions they face will continue to be ignored. What’s more, she writes that if teachers devote more class time to contextual realities, exam scores will likely be lower. As a result, hierarchy and tensions are lodged within opposing foci of contextualizing the curriculum or preparing students for exams.

“You Can’t Fail Them”

Pedagogic staff in both contexts associated the weight given to such numbers with the pressure to pass students. Simone explained that students’ learning has become watered down due to the link between passing rates, test scores, and rankings. She said the municipal exams contain objective questions that don’t challenge students to think critically but rather are
designed to raise students’ scores. Simone recalled one year when a teacher failed 80% of a class and was reprimanded by school administration, “You can’t fail them.” She also recollected one instance when she failed students, but later discovered the administration passed them. She attributed this to the prominence of school and municipal scores on the IDEB rankings.

Tucano staff complemented these views. Tatiana stated that the preoccupation with numbers is connected to the stress on passing students. She shared that if a second-year teacher does not pass at least 90% of his or her students, he or she might be called on to explain to SEMEC why particular students have not learned what they are supposed to. As a consequence, she said that teachers pass students to the next year level as long as they attend class and even if they don’t have the “capacity.”

Tânia referred to this dilemma as a “domino effect” that stems from the first year and poses “a great obstacle in our school, in our reality.” She singled out literacy as the principal problem in this regard. Tânia disagreed with passing nearly all students even if they can’t properly read or write but said it was “SEMEC’s strategy.” She affirmed, “In spite of this business of being the best in the Northeast, first place of whatever . . . the conditions are very adverse. . . . Much more is needed to change this reality.”

Teresa also admitted challenges related to passing students. However, she argued it’s better to keep students in school than “on the street.” Her comment meshes with Gandin’s (2007) assertion that Brazilian public schools serve as a mechanism of “crowd control.” Teresa’s views and those of other staff cited above also sync with literature documenting the implementation of cycles to reduce drop out and grade repetition rates (Martins, 2009; Valente & Arelaro, 2002). Cycles together with the emphasis on continuous progression through school supposedly ensure
access to a quality education for all and reflect an inclusive educational system in which the state purportedly fulfills its democratic role (Valente & Arelaro, 2002). Yet Valente and Arelaro (2002) remind us that such quantitative improvements have at times been seen as cost-saving rather than pedagogic measures. They profile a 1990s policy in São Paulo in which students automatically passed from one grade level to another to avoid having to spend money on students to repeat a grade level.

8.4 “Ideal & Real Curriculum”

Just as the quantitative elements only reveal “masked” curriculum realities, teachers in both contexts spoke to the disparity between what they termed an “ideal” curriculum and the “real” curriculum they navigate in their realities. Their perspectives form an undercurrent to patterns and complexities detailed in this and the previous chapter. They also help explain why afore-described curriculum knowledge dynamics were forged.

Irrelevance of Theories

The notion of an ideal and a real curriculum is evident throughout my findings yet explicitly surfaced in teachers’ commentary about the irrelevance of theories for their reality. Sabiá teachers talked about the pressure to pass students in this respect. As noted above, they said that students progress through elementary school regardless of their literacy levels. Due to this, teachers teach disparate literacy level students in one class. This dilemma is also noted in the literature on Brazilian schooling (Bencini & Minami, 2006). Silvia claimed that she was teaching her fourth-year students at a second-year level. Solana complained that one of her students was only at a syllabic level of reading. A third-year teacher commented how difficult it
was teaching students who can’t decode words together with others who can read. Sara expounded on how the municipal system “complicates teachers’ work”:

There are predetermined contents along with abilities to acquire and develop for each year. What happens in our reality . . . students pass from one year to the next without the minimal abilities necessary to be at that level. The challenge is to . . . teach the mandatory contents but according to the level of the students. We have to find a methodology that attends to both the pre-syllabic and the literate. What we learned in theory doesn’t work. . . . This is our reality. . . . Good teachers are seen as those whose students pass whereas a bad teacher is viewed as someone with more failed students. . . . We have to list the abilities that students will acquire in the planning, but this is unrealistic because only some students will attain this.

Teachers at both schools provided additional insight into the gap between the ideal realm of principles and theories and the realities they face and their actual pedagogical practices. Their comments reiterate observations on the realities of public school contexts in Brazil (Gentile, 2007; Guimarães, 2008; Martins, 2009; Santos, 2002). Solana at Sabiá shared:

We all work very hard in the demystification of what happens in their daily lives. Students experience crimes, shootings, and drugs all the time. We have to stop and bring these matters to the classroom, which are also knowledge. Every week, every day we have to stop to talk about violence, about the overflowing sexuality. . . . I had a student who used to stay up all night working [dealing drugs] and would sleep in class. I’ve had students who’ve said, “I want to become a drug trafficker” because it brings money. This isn’t part of the curriculum, but it’s part of our curriculum here, practically every day.
Sofia added:

We deal with so many problems that we can’t just be a mediator teacher. We must be psychologists, doctor, father, mother, counselor, break up fights. I know all of us would like to do much more than we do but it’s very difficult because of all these social questions that begin from habit and on the street, and it’s up to us to resolve. . . . Our work is increasingly difficult . . . the curriculum that we have to follow, but at times it is totally distorted . . . from students’ realities. We’ve abandoned the methods that we learned years ago . . . so, we are sort of lost. I often feel lost and without knowing what to do in class.

Sara conveyed that she teaches not according to her philosophy but to Sabiá’s reality:

We have an ideal curriculum and we have a real curriculum. . . . I’ve studied all the theories and methodologies. . . . They [students] see teachers as the authority. They don’t respect what their classmates say, they don’t listen to them. I believe in education, but I believe in education when the child has family support. . . . It’s very complicated to talk about methodology.

Simone offered a similar perspective:

We talk about all these education theories. But what we do is not in accordance with what we say. It’s still a long way off. I think the word to define this educational issue in my reality is distance. There is a distance. What’s lacking is practice. I’m guilty of teaching this way, but I’m not alone.

Solana summarized, “We are not prepared for the students that come to us in public school.”
Tucano teachers also referred to the influence of harsh local realities on the curriculum. They spoke about “shootouts” in Triunfo, students who use drugs, and a girl who was raped. Tânia told me about a student of hers who spends much of the night on the street and comes to class exhausted. Tânia wondered, “What am I going to hold her responsible for? Before long she’s going to become a prostitute.” In class one day another student of hers shared that sometimes there isn’t food to eat at home. Tânia pointed out that other students come to school with ripped clothes, have become involved in prostitution, and have parents who are unemployed, use drugs, are incarcerated, or who struggle to make ends meet and can’t properly take care of their children. She referred to these and other issues such as adolescents drinking and smoking during pregnancy as “their world.”

Telma held that that the pedagogical theories of Freire, Vygotsky, and others aren’t applicable to 90% of the students in their reality. “It’s very beautiful on paper, but in practice most of the time . . . you have to change the path.” Thaís concurred, “Most theories remain in the trash. It seems as though those theories . . . are very different and distant from our reality.” She added, “As you’ve seen we have classes with practically 40 students, each with different issues.” Tânia complemented these perspectives with her recognition that the gap between the “real and the ideal remains very far.”

Additionally and, in response to my question about whether students were learning to think critically about issues mentioned in class such as violence, Tânia replied, “I hope there can be some results . . . but it is very difficult. It is very difficult to change the reality of the neighborhood. I think that there needs to be something more consistent from society and as a whole.” She carried on that she doesn’t pry too much into students’ realities. “Who knows if I’m
going to help or hurt them?” As with Sabiá teachers, Tânia also noted the multiple roles teachers must play in being sensitive to students’ needs. She concluded that the problems aren’t in the schools but lie in society, and that SEMEC should therefore get to know students’ realities.

**Pedagogical Resource Issues**

Another discrepancy between the ideal and the real curriculum touched on by Sabiá and Tucano staff was the inadequacy of pedagogical resources. Samara spoke at length:

The role of the teacher is to help students understand this history [of Sol and Salvador]. In our case this isn’t very easy because we only have the classroom, multimedia which is the computer lab, but the time is very short. But we don’t have resources so that students can be transported from their neighborhood to Pelourinho [the historic district], to learn about new projects . . . a recycling plant, to compare urban and rural areas. . . . The objective is the following. You do a project . . . visit the Salvador city sanitation landfill for teaching how recycling works. In the child’s mind in a walled-in classroom he imagines millions of things but he doesn’t know the stages of the recycling process for example. So, if we had the means to take him there to see this process, when he returns to the classroom the discussion would be much better because he would have practical knowledge.

She explained that there are buses, but that it is an extremely time-consuming and lengthy process for the school to petition and await authorization from SMEC. Her comments shed light on one difficulty in extending the curriculum beyond school walls as proposed by the PCNs and the Salvador municipal curriculum (Brasil, 1997c; SMEC, 2005; SMEC, 2006).
Samara also complained about the lack of support from SMEC:

We administrators need more support from the Secretary. . . . Hiring teachers depends on the Secretary, workers depends on the Secretary, materials, maintenance. They do not give their divided attention to these needs. . . . This is going to be the fifth Monday that I’m going to go to the front gate and tell the parents, “There is no teacher for your children.” I hear verbal attacks. I receive death threats. This distresses me.

Correspondingly, not only was there a scarcity of textbooks in both contexts, teachers remarked that what textbooks they have are inadequate. Sofia insisted that the textbooks have nothing to do with “their reality.” Solana, Simone, and Tânia felt textbooks were insufficient for addressing contents specified in the PCNs. They related how teachers are continually trying to identify other resources to draw on. For instance, Tânia talked about going beyond what was in textbooks. She said she continually searches for alternative ideas in other books to make content and tasks more interesting and relevant for students. Simone spoke from a different perspective. She wanted to address a local health problem not in the textbook, yet which was part of a municipal curriculum theme due to its prevalence in communities like Sol. However, Simone could not find a suitable video or materials. On top of this, Sabiá teachers said that financing for such materials comes out of their pockets.

Tucano teachers brought up other resource limitations. Tatiana and Thaís lamented that they hadn’t been able to use the school’s computer room in three years due to electricity shortages and financial maintenance issues. Tânia also commented how helpful games were for teaching and learning. “It’s a different story teaching with games.” Nonetheless, she complained that generally there are insufficient materials for the number of students in her class. “There are
only four sets . . . to introduce some content with. It’s difficult because there are 36 students.”

Such constraints facilitate comprehension why school pedagogic projects based on local realities may not be realized as envisioned as Monfredini (2002) writes. These hindrances are ironic given that decentralization is supposed to foster better allocation of educational resources to meet local needs (Arnove, 1997; Gomes et al., 2000; Prawda, 1993; Schiefelbein, 2004).

“Things Aren’t as They Appear”

Tânia and Simone cited disparities between what is stated in official curriculum documents and the actual curriculum in their classrooms as indicative of the “distance” between the ideal and the real. Contrary to the conception of pedagogic projects and school proposals as illustrative of school curricular and pedagogical autonomy, Tânia told me that SEMEC imposes pedagogic projects on Teresina municipal schools. She explained that the peace theme was reflective of a “top-down” mandate that schools had to implement. She felt it was “artificial” and “ineffective” because SEMEC doesn’t understand students’ realities. Her opinions are at odds with more favorable descriptions of pedagogic projects in the literature (Moraes, 2003). Conversely, her views uphold points about why they’ve been contested (Monfredini, 2002).

Simone commented that the contents specified in the PCNs are disconnected from local issues and school conditions. For example, she said the PCNs do not mention the need to discuss matters such as the water shortage problem at Sabiá during part of the semester. Simone acknowledged, “I’m not seeing how to make this linkage between problems that occur in the school with the content.” She continued that when students complain about the floor being wet because of the missing glass windows, the class should spend all morning debating this. “But schools don’t propose this. The proposition is different. . . . The idea is to limit thinking.”
Simone related the disconnect between curriculum and reality with what she termed a “tradition” of public schooling in Brazil. “School is not preparing students for life, for experience, for students to put into practice what they’ve learned. . . . It’s still an on-the-paper culture. It’s not a practicing culture.” Simone affirmed:

The majority of things aren’t contextualized in relation to their lives. . . . There is lots of useless content that students will never utilize. The contents that are proposed are not ideal. This stems from long ago . . . it’s a tradition. . . . Let’s engage with students’ realities [paraphrasing official curriculum rhetoric], but it is far from it.

Simone also talked about pedagogic projects and Sabiá’s pedagogic proposal in reference to a “very large distortion between theory and practice.” Simone cited one project about Salvador’s history for which she did all the work. Nor was there any class discussion about it. She declared that such projects are simply “things for the foreigner to see, for the outsider to see,” and that they only enhance school and municipal system notoriety. “So, these projects don’t exist. They do and they don’t. In practice they don’t. In theory they do. Written project . . . it’s a vice of writing and not doing.” Simone similarly claimed that schools aren’t prepared for the pedagogical practices outlined in Sabiá’s pedagogic proposal. She stated:

It’s a very good document, very well written. Only nobody here adheres to this document. People here don’t make a connection between their practice and what is written on paper. . . . What’s written there is very beautiful. But in actuality it’s not like this. Every school is a victim of this because schools think they know how to act on those theories, how to put them into practice, but schools don’t know how . . . I don’t know how.
Simone likewise spoke about conflicting pedagogical principles and practices. She conveyed that she was “distressed” because she wasn’t teaching according to her beliefs. She reflected that she should not tell students to be quiet and that some were “excluded” in terms of participation. Simone contrasted this with when she used to value students’ discussions about society. “What’s lacking the most is my stimulating this question of critique, of citizenship, of interaction itself.” As well, she stressed that my research enabled me to discern the reality that I would not have uncovered by reading curriculum documents. “But you are here and seeing that it is very different, that things aren’t as they appear.”

Lastly, Simone referred to what she regarded as the distorted notion that students “learned something.” Simone stressed that teachers don’t examine what this constitutes and questioned whether it was just to “only teach the bare minimum. Is the poor class, which I belong to, only interested in ending up with leftovers?” She saw herself as “contaminated with this” and felt public schooling was “a tremendous deception.” Simone concluded:

Education isn’t good . . . their future isn’t good. . . . They’re not going to make it to university. The type of education and the opportunities are different for those in private schools. . . . I fight about passing students just to pass . . . so that the school scores high on the IDEB ranking. It’s a crime.

Her points of view are analogous to those of Brazilian scholars who question the quality and equity of public schooling in Brazil (Gadotti, 1997; Gandin, 2007; Gomes et al., 2000; Oliveira, 2004; Valente & Arelaro, 2002).
Deconstructing the Ideal & Real Curriculum

Pedagogic staff’s perspectives on contradictions between ideal principles and conditions and actual realities and practices are partially supported by literature on public schooling in Brazil and elsewhere. Santos (2002) draws attention to the official–enacted curriculum divide. As she states, perhaps the most surprising aspect of public school education policies in Brazil and, the PCNs in particular, is their minimal impact on the “school reality.” She specifies how teachers tend to resist profound pedagogical changes such as those outlined in the PCNs. Benavot and Resh (2001) spotlight a similar gap between the official and what they term the implemented curriculum in Israel. They note that, in spite of the highly centralized educational system there, school curricula vary considerably due to local conditions and social forces. Bjork’s (2003) research on educational decentralization/centralization and school curriculum in Indonesia also identifies a “mismatch between central expectations and local realities” (p. 199).

Nevertheless, literature on the “distance” between the official and enacted curriculum in Brazil does not speak to intricacies across the broader domain of the ideal–real web. Scholarly writings on public elementary schooling in Brazil do not delineate the strands spanning transnational influences, national and sub-national education policies, the official and enacted curriculum, pedagogical principles and practices, and contextual realities. They do not document how education policies relate to what happens in classes and why, nor how either conflict with conceptualizations of the enacted curriculum espoused in curriculum documents. Moreover, while scholarly research provides clarity on why teaching is a complex, dynamic, and contextually situated practice that may embody “conflicting principles and practices” (Niyozov,
2008), literature on schooling in Brazil does not present how and why teachers’ differing principles and practices cut across the themes and sub-themes that emerged from my research.

Participants’ conceptualization of an ideal and real curriculum is therefore distinguishable from literature on official–enacted curriculum gaps. Pedagogic staff’s perspectives offer further insight into three interconnected paradoxical aspects of curriculum knowledge dynamics in this vein. First, neoliberal ideological currents trump those of critical theoretical thought. Second, centralized elements of educational decentralization/centralization policies override decentralized ones. Third, curricular reform at the official level of documents is a facade.

An intriguing characteristic of public schooling in Brazil is the confluence of neoliberal and critical theoretical currents flowing through education policies and curricula (Gandin, 2007). These currents have pervaded education reform in Brazil since the 1990s. The alignment of Brazilian basic education with global economic competitiveness and growth rationale is evidence of the neoliberal influence (Borges, 2008; Canen & Grant, 1999; Derqui, 2001; Gandin, 2007; Hypolito et al., 2009; Lopes & Macedo, 2003; Marcondes, 1999; Moraes, 2003; Wong & Balestino, 2003). Specific examples include centralized evaluations, national curriculum content standards, national and municipal ranking systems, and the idea that expanded enrollment provides a boost to the economy (Kempner & Jurema, 2002; Lopes & Macedo, 2003; Wong & Balestino, 2003). The exams and rankings inform the official determination of public school quality and hold municipalities, schools, and teachers accountable for meeting target figures. They also reflect the growing interest in assumed connections between quantifiable educational quality and economic productivity (Arno, 2003; Broadfoot, 2000).
On the other hand, struggles for more democratic schooling, better salaries and working conditions, the emphasis on providing access to primary schooling to youth once excluded from formal education, and the shifting of greater curricular and pedagogical authority from the federal level to municipalities and schools mark the impact of non-neoliberal forces on public schooling in Brazil (Gandin, 2007; Lopes & Macedo, 2003). The tenets of interdisciplinarity and, in particular, contextualization showcase how critical theoretical ideas have shaped the official curriculum in Brazil. An affiliated goal of public schooling stated in curriculum documents in Brazil is intervention in and transformation of society. This critical theoretical foundation distinguishes the official public school curriculum in Brazil from that in the United States or Canada.

Goals of simultaneously fomenting economic growth and enhancing the country’s competitiveness in the global market while remedying societal issues are thus situated in Brazil’s public school policies. Similar incompatible aims of schooling have been discerned in contexts such as North America and Africa (McNeil, 1988; Samoff, 2003b). Conflicting neoliberal and critical theoretical streams in Brazilian public schooling become even more visible through the lenses of municipal school pedagogic staff. Most notably, their conceptualizations of the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy nexus in municipal schools uncover how neoliberal ideological currents overpower those of critical educational thought. This phenomenon is apparent in the weight given to standardized exams, rankings, and associated quantitative conceptions of educational quality. It also shapes what knowledge is engaged with, and how and why it is done so in the enacted curriculum realm of classrooms. Participants’ discourse on the priority given to math and Portuguese along with the obsession with numerical indicators of
quality such as attendance figures, passing rates, and test scores at the expense of the pedagogical tenets and practices of interdisciplinary and contextualization supports this.

Informal and formal interviews with pedagogic staff yielded an intertwined finding. They unveil how and why centralized elements override decentralized facets of municipal school curricula in Brazil’s Northeast. Participants’ perspectives on the pressure to teach predetermined content at a particular pace and being held accountable for meeting centralized quality indicators divulge that the pedagogical and curriculum autonomy touted in curriculum documents is misleading. Their views substantiate scholarly literature that examines tensions between autonomy and accountability amidst educational decentralization/centralization in the Americas (Astiz et al., 2002; Derqui, 2001; Gvirtz, 2002; Mazurek et al., 2000; Schugurensky, 2003). A critique of this dynamic in the region is that it has reduced municipal and school authority and autonomy as federal regulatory pressures and accountability measures rise (Fischman et al., 2003; Gomes et al., 2000; Hypolito et al., 2009; Mazurek et al., 2000; Schiefelbein, 2004; Schugurensky, 2003; Valente & Arelaro, 2002). Findings from my research are also consonant with observations that schools in Brazil have experienced increasing degrees of accountability to the central state (Gomes et al., 2000; Hypolito et al., 2009; Marcondes, 1999; Valente & Arelaro, 2002). As a result, teachers there face greater productivity demands and are blamed for shortcomings in students’ performance (Hypolito et al., 2009; Valente & Arelaro, 2002).

My research thereby corroborates assertions that decentralization/centralization policies constitute a contradictory alliance that exerts substantial control over curricula (Hypolito et al., 2009; Karlsen, 2000; Zadja, 2004). While the decentralization/centralization dynamic does reflect “strengthening product control and relaxing process control” to a certain extent as
Schugurensky (2003) observes, my findings indicate that the weakening of process control is superficial. The process is constrained by a range of centralized pressures. As various scholars contend, the devolution of authority to local levels by way of educational decentralization can be illusional (Mazurek et al., 2000; J. Portelli, personal communication, July 20, 2010; Tatto, 1999; Whitty et al., 2010). Decentralization can in fact be used as a means to centralize control over education systems (J. Portelli, personal communication, July 20, 2010; Tatto, 1999).

The centralized over decentralized dynamic is also in line with Bjork’s (2003), Gvirtz and Beech’s (2004), and Osei’s (2010) studies on public school curriculum reform in Argentina, Indonesia, and Ghana respectively. Collectively their research suggests that curriculum reform is “unfulfilled” in these contexts as it remains at the paper level of documents. Gvirtz and Beech (2004) attribute this situation in Argentina to the centralized regulatory measures that hinder curriculum decentralization. They state, “Decentralization did not happen in practice. The centralized logic of the Argentine education system survived the reform and overtook some of the instruments of curricular regulation that were changed” (p. 381).

A salient observation then is that the most legitimate curriculum knowledge in Brazil’s municipal elementary schools is that which is defined at the national and municipal level rather than in schools. National exams and rankings occupy the pinnacle of importance as municipal systems orchestrate accountability mechanisms to synchronize with these. Teachers’ perspectives reveal that neither the pedagogical principles espoused in documents nor pedagogical practices in classrooms are important to municipal secretaries of education or the public school system. Instead, the system’s quality is gauged by quantitative benchmarks set at the federal level. As teachers mentioned, test scores and other numbers count, not how they teach. This finding aligns
with critiques of neoliberal emphases on quantitatively measurable outputs of educational systems together with the neglect of qualitative conditions and day-to-day practices (Arnove, 1997; Klees, 2008; Samoff, 2003a; Schiefelbein, 2004; Schugurensky, 2003).

What is also curious about the case of Brazil is that curricular reform at the official level of documents is a facade. This facade displays the “distance” between the ideal and real in three respects. First, the emphasis on centralized control over decentralized authority conflicts with the pedagogical tenets espoused in the PCNs and municipal curriculum documents. It is incongruent with the principles of interdisciplinarity and transversality/contextualization, including the notion of locally constructed and contextually relevant curriculum knowledge. As mentioned in Chapter 7 and, as Domingues et al. (2000) point out, exams reinforce disciplinarity and act as an impediment to interdisciplinarity. This finding supports Santos’ (2002) observation of the minimum impact of the PCNs on Brazil’s public school classrooms.

Second, a related irony evidently not discussed in literature on Brazilian public schooling is that what counts as official is not what is written in curriculum documents. Critical educational scholars have pointed out that only certain knowledge is deemed worthwhile or official in schooling (Apple, 2003, 2004; Cornbleth, 2000). Yet participants’ standpoints signal that the quality of municipal public schooling in Brazil is not predicated on the conceptions of knowledge and pedagogy elaborated in the official curriculum. Rather, it is based on hierarchical knowledge area segmentation and decontextualization. Math and Portuguese test scores along with statistics such as enrollment figures are all that matter. Additionally, although stated otherwise in the PCNs and municipal curriculum guidelines, societal issues along with students’ knowledge and lived realities are omitted from official measures of quality in municipal schools.
How these are engaged with in the enacted curriculum is not considered important. This is perhaps the most significant illusion of the ideal in contrast with the actual realities teachers contend with in the enacted curriculum.

Third and, connected with this, there is substantial disparity between the critical theoretical ideals traversing official national, municipal, and school curricula in Brazil and how curricula are enacted in classrooms. Although teachers and students ultimately co-construct classroom realities (Apple, 1995, 2004; Giroux, 1988; Giroux & Simon, 1989; Tabulawa, 2004), the decentralization/centralization dynamic intervenes in how curricula are enacted (Astiz et al., 2002; Ball, 1994). More specifically, as Apple (2003), Sleeter and Stillman (2005), and Zadja (2004) have written concerning schooling elsewhere, public school education policies in Brazil clearly affect knowledge legitimacy in the enacted curriculum. Accordingly, even when teachers’ pedagogical principles conform with the weak degrees of classification and framing in curriculum documents, myriad realities spanning policies to contextual peculiarities play a role in the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy nexus in municipal elementary schools in Brazil’s Northeast.

8.5 Conclusion

My overlapping research findings reveal that curriculum knowledge dynamics are embedded in contradictions within and across education policies and curricula. Centralized accountability mechanisms counter decentralized dimensions of curricular and pedagogical authority and autonomy. Connected with this, neoliberal emphases on quantitative indicators of quality outweigh the principles and practices of interdisciplinarity and contextualization marked by critical educational thought. Not only do these features “mask” deeper qualitative contextual
realities that affect schooling. It can also be argued that they widen the gap between the ideal and real curriculum. That is to say, they negate the very curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy nexus proposed as well as the societal understanding and transformation aims of public schooling. This paradox is especially striking in urban periphery contexts in Brazil’s Northeast where municipal public elementary schools are shouldered with expectations of intervening in and redressing societal issues there. I further unpack what I consider to be problematics of these contradictions in the Conclusion. I also examine their significance in relation to the thesis of my study, the urban periphery, comparative education, and research implications.
Chapter 9 – Conclusion

As with a number of nations, improving the quality of public primary schooling has been a focal point of Brazil’s educational initiatives since the 1990s. The thrust of this reform has been to enhance Brazil’s economic competitiveness in the global market, ensure access to primary education for an immense population once largely excluded from formal schooling, improve perceived educational quality shortcomings, and rectify societal inequalities. The principal aim of schooling expressed in curriculum documents is the development of capacities in students necessary for understanding, intervening in, and transforming society.

To this end, a host of educational decentralization/centralization policies have been instituted in Brazil. The curricular and pedagogical centerpiece has been the establishment of National Curriculum Parameters together with the subsequent creation of municipal curricula guidelines and school curricula and pedagogic projects. Traversing these levels of municipal schooling, the tenets of interdisciplinarity and contextualization are intended to comprise the theoretical spine guiding curriculum, teaching, and learning throughout the country. To restate, national, municipal, and school curriculum documents emphasize the integration among curriculum knowledge areas, endorse the contextualization of curriculum with local realities through the incorporation of themes based on urgent societal issues, and conceptualize the curriculum as an interventionist bridge between schools and society. Interdisciplinarity and contextualization are in turn intertwined with the call for municipal and school curricular and pedagogical autonomy.

This concluding chapter states the central thesis of my research on municipal school curricula knowledge dynamics in Brazil’s Northeast amidst this nationwide education reform. It
relates my findings to my research questions, underscores the significance of the urban periphery in understanding municipal school curricula, synthesizes lessons for and contributions to comparative education, and raises educational research implications. I conclude with questions as springboards for further scholarly inquiry into public schooling in Brazil and elsewhere.

9.1 Thesis: Curriculum Knowledge Dynamics Findings & Problematics

Central Thesis

The central thesis of my dissertation is that municipal school curricula knowledge dynamics in Brazil’s Northeast encompass a multilevel web of contradictions. The classification and framing of knowledge in the official curriculum and the relation of such with what knowledge is legitimized in classrooms, how such is transmitted and analyzed, and why is part of a multilevel interplay shaping the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy nexus. It is one that spans educational decentralization/centralization policies informed by transnational yet nationally appropriated neoliberal ideologies, the conceptualization and treatment of knowledge and pedagogy in official national, municipal, and school curricula marked by critical theoretical educational influence, pedagogical practices in the enacted curriculum, pedagogic staff’s theoretical beliefs about curriculum, pedagogy and knowledge, and contextual realities of the urban periphery representative of the majority of public schools in Brazil. Curriculum knowledge dynamics in municipal public elementary schools in Brazil’s Northeast are therefore forged by incongruent ideologies, opposing elements of autonomy and accountability, conflicting pedagogical principles and practices, and a chasm between curriculum ideals and urban periphery municipal school realities.
Supporting Findings

Overlapping themes from my findings support this thesis and address my research questions on the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy nexus. The analysis of the classification and framing of knowledge in the PCNs and municipal curricula of Salvador and Teresina facilitates understanding of what is envisioned as legitimate curriculum knowledge and pedagogy. Overall these documents exhibit weak degrees of classification and framing. They all emphasize the integration among curriculum knowledge areas, champion the contextualization of curriculum by way of the critical engagement with societal realities and the associated lived experiences and knowledge students bring to class, and advocate the co-construction and societal application of knowledge among teachers and students. Interdisciplinarity and contextualization therefore call for “the inclusion of marginalized youth and their realities in the day-to-day workings of public classrooms” (Wong & Balestino, 2003, pp. 77-78).

Patterns that emerged from daily observations of each focus teacher’s classroom at Sabiá in Salvador and at Tucano in Teresina revealed what knowledge was engaged with in the enacted curriculum in both sites. This knowledge constituted textbook and exam preparation content from the knowledge areas of math, Portuguese, science, geography, and history. It also included how students make sense of their experiences but only to a superficial degree, violence and other community realities, and locally relevant themes such as the environment. Teachers’ perspectives on the contextual relevance and utility of curriculum knowledge were a third element of knowledge in the enacted curriculum.

These patterns also revealed how such knowledge was engaged with. Above all, the conceptualization of an integrated enacted curriculum called for in curriculum documents
contradicted the enacted curriculum in each of my research sites. With regard to the first sub-theme of (inter)disciplinarity, knowledge area fragmentation was a dominant characteristic of curriculum organization as well as how knowledge was transmitted and analyzed in each context. At Tucano fourth and fifth-year teachers taught different knowledge areas. At Sabiá separate weeks of diagnostic assessment were devoted to math and Portuguese. Municipal and national exams, as well as the reviews for them exemplified knowledge area fragmentation in both sites. Non test review classes also showed knowledge area segmentation marked by abrupt, disconnected transition between them. What’s more, when knowledge areas were integrated during tasks, they were engaged with in disciplinary fashion. The chief characteristic of the second sub-theme of contextualization that emerged was superficial contextualization. While students’ knowledge, experiences, and local realities were integrated into the curriculum, focus teacher commentary predominated the mention of contextual realities and, in the case of one school, the clarification of the relevance of curriculum knowledge to society. As well, students’ realities, experiences, and knowledge were not critically engaged with. Students were not challenged to express how or why they perceived societal realities in particular ways.

A third pattern overlapped findings depicted in Chapter 7 together with tendencies described in Chapter 8. That is, teachers in both schools dictated to what extent curriculum knowledge was examined. The teachers controlled curriculum tasks, timing, and to a large extent the transmission of school curriculum knowledge. Priority was given to covering what was primarily textbook content. Additionally, teachers did so within predefined timeframes. Students’ voices and, consequently, their knowledge were suppressed in the process. Critical engagement with their lived experiences and local realities was likewise minimized.
Pedagogic staff were pivotal for comprehending why certain knowledge was engaged with and how. Their perspectives shared in formal and informal interviews were key to unlocking reasons for the degrees of (inter)disciplinarity and contextualization noted. With respect to the former, pedagogic staff’s perspectives reveal differing conceptions of interdisciplinarity in theory and practice across the research sites. Tucano staff’s assertion that the curriculum for fourth and fifth-year classes was integrated centered on the contention that curriculum knowledge areas or disciplines are interlinked. Their discourse did not touch on connecting societal themes with these knowledge areas. In contrast, Simone at Sabiá explained why curriculum knowledge areas are taught in “isolated” fashion and not integrated with societal themes. She cited the influence of the disciplinary nature of textbooks on teaching, contended that knowledge areas, tests, and the school system aren’t treated as interdisciplinary, and argued that interdisciplinarity implies a radical change in pedagogical practice that she felt teachers, students, and schools are not prepared for or simply avoid or resist. Concerning contextualization, although pedagogic staff in both schools stressed the importance of bridging the curriculum with students’ realities, experiences and knowledge, both focus teachers stated that teachers tend to underestimate rather than sufficiently build on the knowledge students bring to class. Simone also spoke about the decontextualized traditions of public schooling in Brazil.

Teachers’ perspectives on their tendencies to control knowledge transmission and adhere to routines, teach the predetermined curriculum they are held accountable for, the pressure to do so at a defined pace, the priority given to math and Portuguese, and the emphasis on quantitative measures of quality such as test scores and passing rates offer further explanations behind enacted curriculum knowledge dynamics. Their discourse uncovers overlaps among knowledge
area segmentation, superficial contextualization, emphasis on predetermined curriculum knowledge, teacher–student knowledge transmission, and differential treatment given to school knowledge areas, particularly math and Portuguese, at the expense of students’ knowledge and local realities. Namely, pedagogic staff’s perspectives unveil that knowledge hierarchy, knowledge area fragmentation, and decontextualization are inherent in official and preordained notions of public school quality. These are at odds with the tenets of interdisciplinarity and contextualization. They also conflict with pedagogic staff’s pedagogical principles such as their belief that teachers should be mediators of knowledge in dialogical classrooms.

Undercutting all patterns of what knowledge was engaged with in particular ways and why was the notion of an ideal and real curriculum. The ideal realm of theoretical principles is incongruent with actual realities, the curriculum teachers are expected to follow, and their pedagogical practices. For instance, the pressure to pass students to enhance school and municipal system numbers and notoriety means that teachers have to teach multiple student literacy levels in one class. They are also expected to navigate pressing societal issues such as violence. Not surprisingly, teachers in my study consider themselves unprepared to teach to such realities and regard much of what they learned in theory about pedagogy as irrelevant. In addition, pedagogic staff noted resource limitations such as a shortage of teachers and materials as well as a disconnect between textbooks and their realities. Simone and Tânia also expressed that pedagogic projects and school curriculum proposals were “artificial” portraits that exist on paper only and not in practice. Pedagogic staff’s insight into the real curriculum therefore divulge why afore-described knowledge dynamics occur.
Problematics Exposed

It is informative to further unpack these findings in relation to my research thesis. The interconnected neoliberal trumping of critical theoretical strands, the offsetting of the alleged devolution of curricular and pedagogical authority and autonomy to schools by centralized accountability pressures, and the irony that tenets traversing national, municipal, and school curriculum documents do not factor into national and municipal rankings of educational quality are controversial for a score of reasons.

The decentralization of responsibility for transforming society to municipalities, schools, and teachers is a prime example. As outlined in Brazil’s PCNs and municipal curriculum documents, expectations are for schools to rectify societal problems (Brasil, 1997a; SEMEC, 2008; SMEC, 2006). Yet present-day conditions like crime, violence, environmental degradation, and inequities and inequalities in access to social services and political processes are not disconnected from legacies of slavery, exploitation, and exclusion (Brasil, 1997c; Moraes, 2003; Thomas, 2006; Wright & Wolford, 2003). Centuries of public policies and laws created and manipulated in the interests of the elite have sculpted such conditions, inequities, and inequalities.

Educational scholars have contested the assumption that education reforms alone can resolve such deeply rooted societal problems. Santos (2002) explains it is unfair for teachers to bear this responsibility in light of public school realities in Brazil:

Diverse social problems appear in more perverse forms in school, because they touch an infantile and juvenile population that prematurely feel the weight of hunger, helplessness and signs of a future without hope. In this scenario, the teacher is challenged
to teach this population, a task that, to be performed, ends up involving various others such as resolving alimentation problems and student illnesses, helping students overcome emotional problems, guiding them with regard to sexual behavior, dealing with crime and drug prevention, among others. It is evident, in this context, that teachers are burdened with very complex responsibilities and tasks and too many problems to solve. (p. 364)

She adds that “these problems can only be overcome with a combination of various public policies” addressing underlying issues such as income distribution, employment, housing, sanitation, and health (2002, p. 364).

Levin (as cited in Apple, 2004) offers a similar perspective:

Educational policies that are aimed at resolving social dilemmas that arise out of the basic malfunctioning of the economic, social and political institutions of the society are not amenable to solution through educational policy and reform. . . . There is a deleterious result in our efforts if educational attempts to change society tend to direct attention away from the focus of the problem by creating and legitimating the ideology that schools can be used to solve problems which did not originate in the educational sector. (pp. 38-39)

A related contentious notion is that Brazil’s curriculum documents imply that pedagogical change is the turn key for educational improvement. The message is clear: Quality enhancement and societal transformation is predicated on teachers changing their pedagogical practices. The pedagogical principles of interdisciplinarity and contextualization endorsed in curriculum documents and highlighted in scholarly literature on public schooling in Brazil add weight to
these expectations. Teachers are regarded as “agents of curriculum” and portrayed as having substantial pedagogical autonomy and authority. Their roles are also conceptualized as intervening in and transforming these contexts. Wong and Balestino (2003) write that interdisciplinarity and contextualization present a “significant challenge to educators in the public school system to transform their educational practice in ways that better meet the educational interests and needs of marginalized youth” (p. 78). These tenets are presented as panaceas to realize change. In doing so and, as Simone shared, they convey that other pedagogic practices are incorrect. Furthermore, the call for school pedagogic projects that are to be infused with these tenets imposes tremendous burdens for dealing with issues like violence (Monfredini, 2002). The focus on teachers’ teaching not only scapegoats them for quality shortcomings as uncovered in Chapter 8. More profoundly, it intimates that educational problems and societal inequities and inequalities will persist if they don’t change the way they teach.

Teachers are undeniably linchpins for public schooling in Brazil and elsewhere. However, the emphasis on modifying teaching practice disregards school–society complexities and contradictions between policy and practice. It is shortsighted to assume that altering teachers’ theoretical views will have a domino effect on their practice. It is likewise delusional to center the spotlight on teachers as the actors of pedagogical change when the stage on which they and students co-enact curriculum is situated within a historical backdrop, entrenched traditions of schooling, and prevailing neoliberal ideological streams pushing educational policies. My findings suggest that systemic and societal rather than just individual factors impede education reform. As Tânia noted, broader initiatives are needed to change the urban periphery. I recap facets of these realities and their significance in the subsequent section.
This decentralized responsibility for societal transformation is even more disputable considering that education policies hamper the very pedagogical change espoused and, more broadly, negate the aims of schooling touted in curriculum documents. This occurs in multiple ways. Participants spoke to interconnected obsessions with numbers as quality indicators and accountability pressures that inhibit their autonomy and reduce their authority. Quantitative notions of educational quality are gauged by rankings based on enrollment figures, math and Portuguese scores on standardized national and municipal exams, passing rates, and other statistics. Accountability to such centralized mechanisms of control undermines the alleged devolution of authority and autonomy. This contradicts much of what is stated in official curricula. Pressing societal issues are not taken into account by federal or municipal governments in these rankings. The official proclamations about interdisciplinarity and contextualization are nullified. Instead, knowledge area segmentation and decontextualization are reinforced by the “content race” and the priority of having to focus on improving students’ Portuguese and math scores. Critical engagement with students’ knowledge and lived realities along with associated societal issues is restricted in the process.

9.2 Centrality of the Periphery

The magnitude of my findings is greater considering the urban periphery contexts of my research. Although not straightforwardly addressed in the literature, urban periphery communities such as Sol and Triunfo are intricately linked to recent education reform and present-day public municipal school curricula in Brazil. The following points illustrate the centrality of the periphery in understanding municipal school curricula knowledge dynamics in Brazil’s Northeast.
First, the overwhelming majority of municipal elementary schools in cities like Salvador and Teresina are found in periphery or similar contexts. Additionally, most public schools, whether state or municipal, are situated in these contexts. These periphery contexts are not isolated pockets on the outskirts of cities. Rather, in the case of Salvador the periferia and favelas are sprawling neighborhoods home to most of the city’s population. They are also found throughout the city limits. As a consequence, municipal schooling is geographically demarcated by innumerable periphery communities in the Northeast and other regions.

Second, public schooling is demographically defined by urban residents of the periferia and similar contexts. These communities represent the vast majority of those in Brazil’s public elementary schools in general. The nearly 90% of students who attend public state or municipal schools are almost entirely from the socioeconomically poor areas of the periferia and favelas (Marcondes, 1999; Oliveira, 2004; Schwartzman, 2004). Additionally, with approximately 85% of Brazil’s inhabitants residing in urban areas (IBGE, 2008), the population of the urban periphery accounts for the bulk of public school enrollment in the country.

Third, the realities of the periphery are foundational to municipal school curriculum. Given their majority presence in schools, the immense population of these areas constitutes the alleged aim of public schooling noted in Brazil’s curriculum documents. In other words, the realities in these communities are the focus of curricular and pedagogical principles and practices advocated. They encapsulate the contextualization tenet meant to traverse public schools. Issues most commonly associated with periferia neighborhoods are the focal points of curriculum themes and pedagogic projects in municipal schools. Violence, health matters such as dengue
fever, and social justice conceptions of environmental education are just a few examples. This is because such areas are where Brazil’s societal problems are arguably most acute and pervasive.

Fourth, periphery realities regularly affect the enacted curricula of schools. The realities of “their world” are something teachers have to deal with on a near daily basis as several participants in my study accentuated. Students’ lived experiences and how they make sense of such are therefore explicitly or more subtly part of the curriculum. Such influence might include students’ attitudes, physical, emotional and/or psychological conditions, their commentary, or how they analyze, generate, and contribute knowledge in the enacted curriculum.

Fifth, the urban periphery and similar contexts are an officially acknowledged national target for educational enhancement. They purportedly represent the worst conditions and quality of Brazilian public schooling. Moura Castro for instance writes that such contexts are where “all the problems of drugs, marginality, crimes and demoralized schools” can be found (2007, para. 2). As well, Oliveira (2004) claims, “No state or municipal system of education in Brazil can offer evidence that it offers education of minimum quality to the majority of its students in any way” (p. 54). This is particularly so in the Northeast where dilemmas such as illiteracy are most pronounced and where the quality of public schooling is considered the lowest in the nation. This reputation of public schooling is mentioned in conjunction with the need for dramatic public school improvements. On this note, shock waves rippled through political circles in 2009 when a senator proposed that a solution to public school quality issues was for all elected politicians to enroll their children in public rather than private primary and secondary schools.

Sixth, the knowledge, lived experiences, and realities stemming from the periphery are legitimate on paper, in principle, and to a degree in practice. This validity is printed throughout
curriculum documents and evident among pedagogic staff’s perspectives from Sabiá and Tucano. It is also evidenced by the pedagogical tenet of contextualization described in Chapter 6 together with the sub-themes from pedagogic staff’s viewpoints presented in Chapter 7. It is likewise validated to an extent in the co-constructed realities of classrooms as my findings revealed.

Lastly, the centrality of the periphery is implanted in the core of educational decentralization in Brazil. Decentralization is not just about devolving authority over curriculum to municipalities and schools. It implies that such peripheral units, including communities of the periphery, have control over developing and implementing locally relevant curricula that address pressing realities in these contexts. Consequently, on paper at least, the periferia is envisioned as having a significant presence and say in public schooling.

For these reasons the periferia is central to making sense of what knowledge is legitimized in the curriculum, as well as how and why such knowledge is transmitted and analyzed in contexts similar to those of my study. Nonetheless, while the urban periphery represents the predominant population and context of public schools, the alleged aim of school intervention in and transformation of such contexts, the tenet of contextualization and the accompanying conception that schooling and curriculum should ultimately be locally defined and forged as opposed to nationally standardized, it is also peripheralized by the very educational system that legitimizes it. It is insightful to bridge this anomaly with above-noted problematic aspects of neoliberal emphases over critical pedagogical principles and the associated curtailing of decentralized authority and autonomy by centralized accountability mechanisms.

The confluence of neoliberal market-oriented interests and critical theoretical concerns in public school education policy and curricula in Brazil is both contextually unique yet also
representative of conflicting elements noted in education systems elsewhere. A major divide acknowledged in literature is that between educating students for issues pertaining to citizenship and stimulating economic growth for participation in the global market (McNeil, 1988; Samoff, 2003b). The problematic facet of this lies in how one prevails over the other. Scholars have noted that, amidst neoliberalism, the notion of school as training future workers to stimulate economic productivity predominates (Apple, 2003, 2006; Canen & Grant, 1999; Giroux, 1988; Marcondes, 1999; Stromquist, 2003). This creates an imbalance that swings in favor of market interests at the expense of humanitarian democratic concerns such as inequality (Chomsky, 1999; Giroux, 2004). In the case of Brazil, neoliberal ideologies have shifted the focus of quality improvements to quantifiable indicators that can be compared and ranked. Qualitative realities of communities and schools, the tenets of interdisciplinarity and contextualization, and pedagogical practices in classrooms take a back seat to statistical outputs of schooling. Gandin (2007) contends that neoliberal “solutions to problems” have “exacerbated social exclusion” in the context of Brazil (p. 179). Klees (2008) likewise argues that recent decades of neoliberal policies around the world have further marginalized individuals and communities.

These contradictions point to contested struggles over legitimacy in the curriculum. They indicate who and what is legitimate in municipal public elementary schooling is forged and sustained not by way of the selection, emphasis, and treatment of knowledge in curriculum documents, but rather through accountability measures such as exams and rankings. These mechanisms of control over schooling and, more specifically the curriculum, are regulated from the national level and are reinforced by municipal system pressures. They are “steered from a distance” by federal levers. What is considered legitimate curriculum knowledge is largely
predetermined and decontextualized. This emphasis aligns with national economic development
goals and counters the educational quality arguments in favor of devolution of authority to
municipalities and schools. These findings support claims in the literature that curricula are
arenas of contestation over whose and what knowledge is most legitimate in schooling and
society (Apple, 1995, 2004; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Astiz et al., 2002; Bennett & LeCompte,
1990; Cornbleth, 2000; Darder et al., 2003; Gandin, 2007; Giroux, 1988; Lopes & Macedo,
2003; McLaren, 1998; Shor, 1992). They also corroborate scholars’ assertions and research that
decentralization measures have at times been employed to centralize authority (J. Portelli,
personal communication, July 20, 2010; Tatto, 1999; Whitty et al., 1998).

Arguably the most prominent contradiction in making sense of curriculum knowledge
dynamics is that the students’ world is peripheral to what counts at the end of the day. Though at
the center of contestation over schooling, the legitimacy of the periphery in public school
curricula is a mirage. The periphery is portrayed as legitimate in principle with the intertwined
tenets of interdisciplinarity and contextualization permeating curricula documents from national
to school levels. Yet the critical streams of this official rhetoric are deceptive. Widespread
societal issues and how people who experience such conditions on a daily basis make sense of
them have nothing to do with notions of quality in education policies. This paradox shapes
curriculum knowledge dynamics as it seeps down to the enacted curriculum realm with regard to
what knowledge is engaged with, and how and why it is done so. Though stated otherwise in
federal and municipal government documents, attention is deflected away from the critical
engagement with intertwined societal realities and students’ lived experiences and perspectives.
Pressing “here and now” issues (Vibert & Shields, 2003) facing the vast majority, while
incorporated to a superficial extent, are otherwise excluded in curricula. Students’ knowledge, that is how they make sense of their lived realities, is censored in the process. This knowledge and these realities are relegated to the back burner as teachers must “obey the system” in which quantitatively measurable priorities take precedence.

While it is a fallacy to assume that schools alone can rectify societal issues, it is also problematic to not critically engage with students’ knowledge derived from the qualitative realities of the periferia. This silencing of students can have disabling effects such as causing them to lose interest in school and their roles in society (M. A. Butler, 1998; Sleeter & Grant, 1991). Avoiding analysis of how students (and teachers) make sense of rife and critical societal dilemmas in the public institutional spheres of municipal schools can also inhibit students’ development of a critical understanding of issues that affect their lives (Freire, 2000; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 1998). This can prevent greater consciousness of inequities and inequalities and how such might be transformed (Freire, 2000; Vibert & Shields, 2003). The immediate needs of millions of youth of the periferia throughout Brazil are neglected in the process.

In addition, potentially instructive lessons to learn from the knowledge and lived realities stemming from the periferia might go unexamined in school curricula. As the “school for the poor” comment and lack of response shows, students from such locales might harbor profound insight regarding public schooling and society that is discounted in classrooms. Such curriculum knowledge dynamics send a powerful message to students and communities. If schools are “where the voices of the oppressed are suppressed, something is being ‘taught’ to society” (Gandin, 2007, p. 183). In a system in which meeting centrally defined quality benchmarks takes priority, the morals are that preordained curriculum knowledge is more
important than students’ knowledge, and that quantitative data and affiliated rankings and notoriety are more urgent than their lived realities.

A deeper issue embedded in the centrality of the periphery is who is considered “marginal” or outside the boundaries of legitimacy, not just in public schooling but in society. To paraphrase Sleeter and Stillman (2005), knowledge legitimacy is rooted in how schooling relates to present-day realities, the future society citizens want, the kinds of citizens schools intend to shape, and who participates in determining this. These “marginalized” communities often remain beyond the reach of state institutional services, are widely regarded as “illegal” by government authorities, and face the gravest conditions in cities. The curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy nexus in Brazil’s municipal schools epitomizes ongoing struggles of the periferia for social and political inclusion. The lived realities and knowledge of the majority are simultaneously a central current in critical theoretical conceptualizations in curriculum documents yet are kept at the fringes by neoliberal tides. Whose and what knowledge is engaged with, and how and why it is done so in these schools is thus influenced by ideological contestations for control over the direction of schooling and society. There is nothing neutral about such power struggles. This marginalization is momentous considering the urban periphery contexts of my research in a region in Brazil “where the majority is excluded from participation in a market that is anything but free and fair” (Kempner & Jurema, 2002, p. 334).

9.3 Contributions to Comparative Education: Policy & Curriculum

My research findings bear important lessons for curriculum studies, education policies, and comparative education. Namely, my study offers new and noteworthy contributions to scholarly literature by uncovering the interplay among multilevel elements in shaping the
curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy nexus in municipal schools across two urban periphery sites in Brazil’s Northeast.

**Multilevel Analysis**

The multilevel element of my research contributes further understanding to what scholars have referred to as the interplay between global forces and local practices (Arnove, 2003; Broadfoot, 2000; Crossley, 2000; Hayhoe & Mundy, 2008; Marginson & Mollis, 2002; Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006). My study deconstructs how curriculum knowledge dynamics are situated among relations between the transnational ideology of neoliberalism, national and sub-national education policies and official curricula permeated with both neoliberal and critical theoretical orientations, pedagogical practices in the enacted curriculum realm of classrooms, and local realities. For instance, it spotlights contradictions such as how neoliberal currents overpower traditions of critical educational thought in Brazilian education as well as how and why educational centralization mechanisms thwart decentralization measures. To paraphrase Bray and Thomas (1995), unveiling such multilevel relations provides a more “balanced understanding” of complexities of educational practice. Doing so also fosters greater comprehension of the significance of such complexities with respect to societal issues, whether in the urban periphery contexts of my study or in the inner cities of North America. This in turn calls attention to multiple layers of what may be similar yet contextually distinct schooling and society challenges in global contexts.

More specifically, my ethnographic study discerns striking contradictions across the education policy–practice bridge. Most notable are the mismatches between what is espoused in official discourse and policy texts about what ought to be happening in classrooms and the reality
of what occurs (Ball, 1994; Crossley & Vulliamy, 1984). My research illuminates disparities between the critical theoretical strands woven throughout national, municipal, and school curriculum documents and how curricula are enacted in classrooms. In this regard my research addresses what Astiz et al., (2002), Bjork (2003), and Derqui (2001) cite as a dearth of inquiry: how educational decentralization/centralization policies influence curriculum. My findings are also prominent since literature on public schooling in Brazil does not adequately document how the tenets of interdisciplinarity and contextualization play out in the enacted curriculum, not to mention why they are not enacted to the extent envisioned. Likewise, literature does not describe how themes that emerged from my research are intertwined with decentralization/centralization policies and contradictory elements delineated in Chapter 8. Such relations are pivotal for understanding the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy nexus in municipal elementary schools in Brazil’s Northeast and arguably elsewhere. They are also crucial for making sense of whether policies correspond with “the realities of schooling” (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1984, p. 197).

Using a critical theoretical framework to investigate what counts as valid knowledge in classrooms and how such is engaged with and why also addresses a research void. Few comparative studies of how the official curriculum is enacted have been undertaken (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Benavot & Resh, 2001). As well, curriculum knowledge has been insufficiently researched and discussed (Gandin, 2007). Other than reports that local realities are incompatible with public schooling (Almeida, 2003), there is a lack of inquiry into curriculum knowledge across the official–enacted span in Brazil. My examination of the classification and treatment of knowledge in the official curriculum together with an investigation of the pedagogy–knowledge nexus in the enacted curriculum not only attends to this research omission. A singular
contribution of my study is its findings about curriculum knowledge in a context where the theoretical spine of curricula from federal to municipal and school levels is to be unified by the tenets of interdisciplinarity and contextualization/transversality.

My research also stands out for its portrayal of pedagogic staff’s perspectives on curriculum, knowledge, and pedagogy. Their views supplemented my observations in providing insight into how certain knowledge is engaged with and why in classrooms in relation to education policies, the official curriculum, and societal contexts. Case in point, their standpoints facilitate recognition of inconsistencies between curricular and pedagogical autonomy espoused in official documents and accountability pressures. Such paradoxes serve as cornerstones of municipal school curriculum knowledge dynamics in Brazil’s Northeast. Above all, pedagogic staff’s conceptualizations underscore the instrumental roles those “working at the ground level play in policy implementation” as Bjork points out (2003, p. 185). Their perspectives represent potential fruit-bearing seeds for educational theory as well as knowledge that secretaries of education and academic scholars can learn from and examine further.

Comparative Element

Overlapping the multilevel inquiry of my research, the sub-national comparative element of my study offers additional contributions to comparative education literature on curriculum. For one, there is a paucity of sub-national studies in comparative educational research (Bray & Thomas, 1995; Broadfoot, 2000; Fry & Kempner, 1996). Indeed comparative education research has historically been defined by a tradition of cross-national comparisons (Bray & Thomas, 1995; Broadfoot, 2000). Sub-national comparative research moves beyond summative national comparisons in fostering greater cognizance of heterogenous intricacies within national contexts
Juxtaposing curriculum knowledge dynamics across two urban periphery municipal public elementary schools in Bahia and Piauí exposed intriguing contrasts and similarities. Teresina’s curriculum for all knowledge areas and Salvador’s municipal guidelines for the transversal theme of the environment are examples of distinct official curricula. The conceptions of school curriculum organization along with teachers’ pedagogical responsibilities for teaching two or three knowledge areas in the case of Tucano or teaching all five knowledge areas as at Sabiá are illustrative of variations in the enacted curriculum. Such differentiation reflects curricular autonomy municipalities and schools are intended to have per curriculum documents.

In terms of similarities, my findings reveal that curriculum knowledge legitimacy is shaped by policy–official curriculum–enacted curriculum contradictions in both research sites. Teachers’ contrasting conceptions of their pedagogical principles and practices are linked with accountability measures like tests and rankings and a chasm between the ideal and real curriculum. This suggests that accompanying challenges such as the pressure to teach predetermined content at a certain pace are not isolated. Intertwined with this, interdisciplinarity and contextualization were enacted to only a superficial extent in classrooms in both contexts of my research. This sheds light on how matters such as violence are incorporated into and impact curriculum in related ways in periphery locales representative of most public schools in Brazil.

Similarities noted are perhaps indicative of tendencies elsewhere in Brazil. Yet there is a scarcity of literature on the relation between the curriculum–knowledge–pedagogy nexus and

(Fry & Kempner, 1996). This is particularly pertinent in countries like Brazil with marked regional variation and significant degrees of political and educational decentralization (Bray & Thomas, 1995).
urban periphery realities. My sub-national comparison therefore not only enhances cognizance of “the kinds of knowledge and people selected as legitimate within the schools” (Apple, 1995, p. 52) in Brazil’s Northeast. It also offers a platform for investigation of the intersection of education policy, curriculum, and local realities in other regions of Brazil.

The comparative element of my research also carries lessons for contexts beyond Brazil. Understanding how curriculum knowledge is shaped in diverse contexts can yield better understanding of educational and societal issues worldwide. Doing so can help scholars see current policy and curriculum issues in comparative education through different lenses. Learning about curriculum knowledge dynamics in the urban periphery of Brazil’s Northeast can challenge educators to question assumptions about educational tendencies in contexts more familiar and/or proximate to them. This is notable considering problematic trends uncovered in my research. Such trends might offer useful lessons for inner city school and other contexts facing similar dilemmas elsewhere (J. Portelli, personal communication, July 20, 2010). To paraphrase Sleeter and Stillman (2005) again and, as unpacked above concerning the significance of problematic policy–curriculum contradictions for periferia communities in Brazil, whose and what knowledge is most legitimate, the aims of schooling, and the future of societies might be at stake.

9.4 Research Implications & Questions for Further Inquiry

This multilevel comparative ethnographic case study divulges complexities and contradictions spanning transnational forces of neoliberalism, education decentralization/centralization policies, the conceptualization and treatment of knowledge in the official curriculum, the pedagogy–knowledge nexus in the enacted curriculum, and contextual realities representative of the majority of municipal public schools in Brazil. In doing so, this research
serves as a springboard for further inquiry into these dynamics there and elsewhere as well as carries important implications for comparative education research on curriculum and policy.

Further inquiry would advance understanding of municipal systems of education within and across regional contexts in Brazil and beyond. This might entail scrutiny of the links between educational decentralization/centralization policies, official and enacted curricula, and realities of the periferia or contexts facing similar issues in other countries. Doing so could yield greater insight into whether the knowledge, realities, and experiences of the majority are centered or “relegated to the periphery” (Darder et al., 2003) and why. What’s more, deeper analysis of the junction of school and society problems in places like the periferia and the inner cities of North America would enhance cognizance of the complexity of such issues, illuminate curricular and pedagogical challenges pedagogic staff face, and possibly prompt policy-makers to question the bridge between education policies, school curricula, and society. An expanded inquiry into how pedagogic staff make sense of local realities and the relations of such to schooling might be enlightening in this respect.

Associated empirical questions that deserve examination are: (a) What are teachers’ perspectives on relations between education policies, curriculum, and pedagogy in other municipal school contexts in Brazil (or elsewhere)? (b) How do they make sense of what knowledge is engaged with in their classrooms and why? and (c) What regional variations and similarities exist in these regards? Investigations into answers to these and related questions could supplement my research findings by highlighting additional details of curriculum knowledge dynamics in diverse contexts.
References


