

# A Testimony of Hope

## A Book Review of *Critical Consciousness in Curricular Research*

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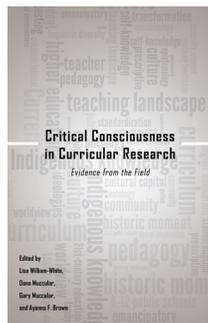
### Establishing Curriculum Work in Teacher Praxis

Curriculum inquiry is an underutilized element of teaching and learning in the United States. The study and praxis of curriculum are alienated from what is considered part of a teacher's practice, to the detriment of both teachers and students (Pinar, 2012). And yet teachers' deep understanding of curriculum promotes classrooms imbued with creative intellectual engagement and mutually respectful collaboration grounded in trust, agency, and personal integrity (e.g., Brock & Kincheloe, 2007). Engagement, trust, agency, and integrity are qualities that provide a strong foundation for democratic education, as Noddings (2005) articulated in her argument in favor of a democratic education influenced by Dewey:

*[Dewey's democratic education] is a matter of trying things out with the helps of experts (teachers), of evaluating, revising, comparing, sharing, communicating, constructing, choosing . . . As soon as we impose our values on a new generation we risk losing those values that are most needed in a dynamic society—those that encourage reflective criticism, revision, creation, and renewal. (p. 165)*

*Critical Consciousness in Curricular Research: Evidence from the Field* (William-White, Muccular, D., Muccular, G., & Brown, 2013) offers a glimpse into classrooms where teachers engage themselves and their students in curricular inquiry. The stories in this anthology reflect a distinct vision of democratic education that frames curricular inquiry as a form of democratic activism: as a counter-narrative to mandates for a division between teachers and their practice of curricular inquiry and development.

The distance between curriculum and instruction widened in the post-Sputnik period of American reactivity to the narrative that U.S. schools lacked sufficient academic rigor, especially in math and science. Kliebard (1995) argued that teachers were blamed, and "professional educators were no longer given free rein in curriculum matters" (p. 228). Champions of the 1983 publication *A Nation at Risk* further crippled teacher agency by allocating curriculum



development to "administrative experts or . . . publishers, with few, if any contributions from teachers . . . In its most ideologically offensive form, this type of prepackaged curriculum [was] rationalized as teacher-proof" (Giroux & McLaren, 1986, p. 219). Immutable pathways of curricular content were built, as if schools were toll roads upon which students would travel. No child would be left behind on this road, which was bordered by guardrails of scripted curriculum to keep teachers from getting their students lost or injured. Along the way, teachers became technicians of prescribed instructional and assessment techniques, as well as managers of youth whose completeness as human beings was indicated by their single-point performance on ostensibly neutral, scientifically based tests.

It is in such a bleak environs—where teachers are branded as contaminants of curriculum—that *Critical Consciousness in Curricular Research* (William-White et al., 2013) offers a diverse set of concrete strategies for establishing curriculum work as an integral part of what it means to be a teacher, especially a democratic educator. Within the collection's wide range of teachers' experiences and perspectives emerges a common manifesto: Curriculum engagement is a pathway to liberating teaching and learning from the grips of historical and political forces that threaten human dignity and the core principles of democratic education.

The value of this anthology of teachers' stories comes from its explicitly optimistic outlook. While the punitive consequences of curricular practices that reveal and counter hegemonic schooling are illustrated in vivid anecdotes, the book's main message is one of hope. Its authors emphasize the political promise, educative value, and spiritual triumph of curricular activism.

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## Democratic Education Through Curricular Activism

In keeping with one of the central principles of democratic education—the rejection of false divisions between learning that occurs in and out of school—the portraits in *Critical Consciousness in Curricular Research* (William-White et al., 2013) address three areas of curricular intersectionality: home, school, and third-space learning contexts. The inclusion of multilogical voices illustrates curricular inquiry “in an effort to showcase the dialectic between educators, their curricular approaches, and forces that seek to undermine agency for democratic learning opportunities” (William-White, et al., 2013, p. xvii). Such diversity of authorship is critical for an anthology grounded in Pinar’s (1975) construct of curriculum as the *currere*: curriculum as a personal journey of critical reflection on past, present, and future pedagogical practice in historicized moments.

The tension in public education between reductionist strategies—such as scripted curriculum—and democratic rhetoric is apparent throughout the book. In her introduction, editor William-White (2013) criticizes Obama’s efforts at educational reform on the grounds that the latest round is as insufficiently responsive to the lived experiences of the teachers and students as was No Child Left Behind. The authors’ pedagogical emphasis on the legitimacy of the lived experiences of the students links this book most closely to the tenets of democratic education:

*A curriculum conceived of as a product continues to be a powerful artifact reflecting cultural values formed by those who hold the power to determine what is while denigrating the knowledges and experiences of other social groups. (p. 4)*

In a democratic society, the individual voices of citizens have integrity, a philosophical position manifested by the political principle of one person-one vote (voice). As Dewey (1916) pointed out in *Democracy and Education*, schools reflect the societies in which they operate. The implicit question raised by the voices of *Critical Consciousness in Curricular Research* (William-White et al., 2013) is: What is the potential of critical curricular studies for imbuing public schools with the principles of democracy? How can curricular activism, as illustrated in this anthology, “consider what happens in classrooms, how students make sense of what they are presented, and how knowledge is mediated between teachers and students” (p. 4)? These questions are explored through 15 examples of classrooms in which teachers enact curricular inquiry as a form of democratic education.

While the book’s framing of curricular activism as democratic engagement is persuasive, it is the individual stories from the field of practice that generate pedagogical vitality; the stories are where the curricular conversations happen, where curriculum theory is animated by curricular activism. In one of these stories, Gary Muccular’s (Muccular Jr., G., 2013) student Natasha writes an autobiographical essay of her experiences living in urban public housing. Such an account could be taken as reinforcement of the stereotypes about inner city life—namely, that such a life is fraught with peril, despair, violence, and an apparent lack of humanity. But Muccular’s “dense questioning” of his student’s writing upends the

practice of treating student essays as products. Treating student work as a product of curriculum, but not as the curriculum itself, isolates Natasha’s personal experience from the larger political, economic, and cultural forces—such as institutional racism—that contribute to the limitations on her access to safe housing for herself and her children.

Instead, Muccular (William-White et al., 2013) shows us how the autobiographical writing of marginalized and disenfranchised students “can contribute to the curriculum conversation to reconceptualize ways to understand how students’ self-stories as *the curriculum*, while understanding how stories enable study of the sociopolitical issues shaping people and their communities” (p. 36). For example, following a harrowing account of a gruesome attempted homicide that occurred outside of Natasha’s son’s window, Muccular lays out the following questions:

- What psychological issues might this type of violence and bullying have on developing youth or adults in the area?
- What economic and political circumstances can you think of that produce the types of issues described in the text?
- What ideals do you glean from this story about the author’s concept of parenting? (p. 40)

In Muccular’s example, as well as several others, curricular activism serves as a conduit for political and spiritual reenfranchisement of students and teachers whose voices are otherwise silenced through undemocratic pedagogies. These stories are as much about student engagement and agency as they are about teacher engagement and agency, thereby establishing this anthology as a valuable addition to any democratic educator’s bookshelf.

*Critical Consciousness in Curricular Research* (William-White et al., 2013) reanimates curriculum studies as part of a teacher’s practice. Given the authors’ diversity of professional roles, ethnic identities, and research methodologies and years of experience in education, this text would work well as both a professional development text for faculty and a central text for use in a graduate or doctoral program. The vivid transparency with which the experiences of marginalized faculty and students are conveyed is a gift for teachers who seek to develop their own critical consciousness. This gift might be especially useful for those teachers who experience racial, economic, gender, and/or ethnic privilege, given the tiny window provided for studying student and faculty experiences underrepresented in academic literature. Hartlep (William-White et al., 2013), in “The ‘Not-So-Silent’ Minority: Scientific Racism and the Need for Epistemological and Pedagogical Experiences in Curriculum,” argued that “teachers and students must learn and experience things that they have not experienced due to their inhabitation of segregated settings” (p. 61). Understanding and accepting that one’s epistemologies are biased is a prerequisite, Hartlep maintained, for dismantling racist and Eurocentric teaching in schools.

Some of the chapters, such as Her’s (William-White et al., 2013) “Nrhiav Kuv Lub Suab, a.k.a. Finding My Voice: A Hmong Student-Teacher’s Curriculum Story,” are particularly well suited for teacher candidates who are navigating field placement experiences that are dissonant with the culturally responsive pedagogy

espoused in their university coursework. Her crafts an insightful autoethnographic analysis of the intersectionality among the lessons learned from her Hmong parents about maintaining a positive outlook during challenging situations, the social justice mission of her bilingual teacher education program, and the experience of being excluded through language practices in her student teaching placement. Her's story is a great example of *Critical Consciousness in Curricular Research's* message of hope: while many authors address ways in which they have been punished for practicing curricular inquiry and development, the dominant theme is one of faith in the power of teacher and student engagement through curricular activism.

## Reframing Accountability Through Curricular Consciousness

*Critical Consciousness in Curricular Research* (William-White et al., 2013) echoes the approach taken by advocates of the holistic education. Holistic educators transformed the accountability rhetoric into a new set of standards to which educators are beholden: an engaged sensibility, an orientation of interconnectedness, and a deep sense of presence in the classroom communities. A learner's relationship with the curriculum is an important part of the holistic (and democratic) reframing of what it means for teachers to be accountable: "Transformational learning acknowledges the wholeness of the child. The curriculum and the child are no longer seen as separate but connected," (Miller, 2007, p. 11). This move by holistic proponents parallels Dewey's (1902) critique of dominant educational practices in the early 1900s, which he rejected in favor of child-centered inquiry and congruence among learners, subjects, and teachers. Contemporary proponents of holistic education are aligned with Dewey's emphasis on the role of education in a democratic society.<sup>1</sup>

The holistic reframing of accountability shifts sources of power and authority away from policymakers who, at best, are not aware of classroom realities and, at worst, intentionally apply racist curricular policies that maintain White, male control through a school culture of oppression and alienation. A recent case in point is the successful attempt in 2011 by (all White, mostly male) state and district authorities in Arizona to shut down the Tucson Unified School District's Mexican-American Studies Program. The parable of Tucson is a message of antidemocratic bigotry in education.

In *Critical Consciousness in Curricular Research* (William-White et al., 2013), holistic accountability is coconstructed through "communities of care" (William-White, Wood, Essien-Wood, Belton, Muccular Jr., G., Geary, & Newman, 2013). Power shifts toward the students, teachers, and administrators who cultivate and are nurtured by quality relationships that promote learning and academic achievement. Other scholars, such as Noddings (2005) and hooks (2003), have advanced the use of communities of care as an essential element of democratic education: "Forging a learning community that values wholeness over division, dissociation, splitting, the democratic educator works to create closeness" (hooks,

2005, p. 49). In *Critical Consciousness*, communities of care in classrooms allow for a type of democratic leadership the editors conceptualize as third-space mentoring. As an example of third-space mentoring, William-White (2013) coauthored a chapter with a small group of her graduate students that should be required reading in any graduate education program claiming to be culturally responsive, justice oriented, and critical constructivist. In that chapter, the authors describe their community of care:

*Dismantling oppressive structures to create a community of learners was preeminent. In that frame, we viewed each other as kin—family members in our endeavors, which meant that the hierarchal systems and competitive efforts were rejected. Actualizing this type of community meant that all decisions for the development of scholarly engagement—academic reading and writing related to issues impacting African American communities—were efforts collectively deliberated over. (p. 237)*

It is hard to imagine, in our current curricular climate, that such communities of care could become the rule rather than the exception in public institutions of learning. Fortunately, editors William-White, Muccular, Muccular, and Brown provide a sufficient testimony of hope to revitalize the notion of curriculum work as part of what it means to teach from the tradition of democratic education.

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<sup>1</sup> See Miller (1997) for an interdiscursive analysis of democratic government, public education, and the holistic paradigm.