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Curriculum Issues: *Democratic Education and Knowledge*

Educators are extremely vocal, and quite rightly, on the issue of granting students just, equitable, and equal access to learning. Who are the students, they ask, based on race, culture, or social-economic status being denied access to the curriculum and learning? While this concern is certainly legitimate, there seems to be little attention given to an even more basic and original issue linked to understanding the curriculum, which is brought to light by Darling-Hammond, et al (2005), namely, the issue and question in curriculum studies of “what knowledge is worth knowing?” (p. 190). This relates directly to my concerns with a formal method of philosophy for education. For not only do we need to focus on who is granted free passage to the curriculum, but as well, and perhaps more important, we should be concerned with the form(s) of knowledge being accessed, because this reveals the epistemic grounding of the curriculum. With this understanding, we structure the curriculum, in its entirety, in a holistic manner, to facilitate the transference and assimilation of the types of knowledge we deem important. It is also the case that the knowledge we value most, when manifest and passed along in our classrooms, has a direct and powerful effect on the type of student we envision our educational practices readying for the so-called “real world.”

As Spring (1991) writes, “The dominant public goals for education in the twentieth century are economic. These economic goals include preparation for work, the control of labor, and economic development” (p. 5). As Spring (1991) argues, since the goal and purpose of education is contributing to our economic development, American schools “emphasize achievement in math and science,” and this emphasis on math and science, as Spring (1991) points out, “is a political decision based on economic concerns” (p. 4). For example, president George W. Bush, in the 1990 *State of the Union*, explicitly made such a declaration. It is clear that if our schools are driven by mercantile aspirations in the direction of scientific and technological superiority, our society places an emphasis on knowledge emerging from the *analytic-logical model*, which in turn downplays the importance, or value, of knowledge stemming from the *intuitive-perceptual model*, which is to say a model of knowledge that is associated with the humanities, fine arts, and music. Curricula, as argued by Spring (1991), dictates that math and science, from an epistemological perspective, assumes a privileged position of power, they quite literally dominate the school.

The potential negative implication of this move toward math and science in the curriculum relates to what Darling-Hammond, et al (2005) have said regarding the importance of understanding the ways in which students acquire knowledge, for a “learner-centered” vision in curriculum involves cognitive psychology “develop[ing] a base of research on learning that brings new insights that can help teachers with the main aspects of instruction design” (p. 186). The authors mention the choice and sequencing of activities in the classroom as having a marked effect on how students learn, I feel that a cognitive and meta-cognitive approach to learning should also inform those designing, planning, and implementing a curriculum from the perspective of knowledge and knowledge forms and the assimilation thereof. As Darling-Hammond et al (2005) argue, we must attend to the “research about the kinds of understandings

that are necessary for transfer and for further learning” (p. 185). Educators should recognize that this authoritarian and exclusionary attitude with respect to *knowledge forms*, which is intimately bound up with learning abilities, styles, and modes of intelligence, is doing great harm, for it is impeding the processes that might lead to the development of a holistic, autonomous student. In short, such attitudes truncate, and in some instances preclude, the development an autonomous democratic citizen, one is also at once an individual, with an “identity,” who might effectively make a legitimate contribution to the betterment of herself and country.

Gardner (1983) focuses on theories of intelligence, forms of knowledge that emerge in the course of cognitive development as learners actively engage in specific activities and tasks. Gardner was especially interested in the crucial role of art-humanities based knowledge in the process of human development. For example, Artistic and aesthetic aptitude categorizes three of the seven modes of intelligence Gardner identifies: (1) *Musical Intelligence*; (2) *Visual-spatial Intelligence*; and (3) *Physical-Kinesthetic Intelligence*. Gardner is careful to point out, the seven modes of intelligence are neither disparate nor separable. Therefore, the *Mathematical-logical* mode of intelligence is not antithetical to the *Visual-spatial* mode of intelligence. Rather, they function as a cognitive ensemble and their relationship is one of reciprocity Gardner’s claim is that when more than two modes of intelligence work together, the student (whether child or adult) learns more, learns faster, and is able to retain more information over a greater span of time.

I suggest that a curriculum designed around the essential notion that art and music are expendable in the grand scheme of things (a curriculum, incidentally, with which I was associated in 1994), is setting up an educational model wherein three of the seven kinds of intelligence are neglected within the curriculum. This I argue happens at great peril to the future of what it means to be human, and beyond humane. Pinar (1994) echoes these sentiments when stating that a curriculum that privileges calculative forms of intelligence, fails to tap into the contemplative and meditative aspects of our humanity, and while this calculative conception of human intelligence might be, and indeed is, useful to the present form of education, “the corporation - it is less helpful in investigations of more basic questions of human experience, experiences that might not lead directly to economic development and productivity” (p. 232). Basic existential questions, philosophical questions about the human experience referenced by Pinar, are inextricably bound up with what I have suggested above concerning what it might mean to be an autonomous, functioning, and flourishing democratic citizen. A philosophical approach might approach the understanding of the human from a slightly different perspective than our contemporary planners of curricula, i.e., rather than asking: “What *is* the ideal democratic citizen?” Philosophy would concern itself with the following query, “What is it to exist *as* a democratic citizen?” And beyond, the more fundamental concern with “What is it to be *as* a human being at all?”

As Darling-Hammond, et al (2005) state, an awareness of the educational and social perspectives informing curriculum planning and implementation is necessary, and in America, “curriculum goals are, or should be, shaped by the requirements of preparation for citizenship in a democracy” (p. 170). The authors go on to add that when considering what is taught and the manner in which it is taught, there must be an eye toward the overarching contribution of education to the development of a productive citizen. As related to my concern, examining the

fundamental forms of knowledge, and their respective modes of intelligence, underlying the curriculum, it is also the case that we must be aware of the way in which we are conceiving and defining the archetypical democratic citizen. We must be aware that this definition of the human being as a flourishing and contributive member of our democratic society is wholly contingent upon the system of values undergirding the social, political, and economic structures of the reigning hegemony or dominant ideology. In short, we understand the type of productive citizen our schools are attempting to fabricate and churn-out only when we are able to bring to light the system of values that serves as the foundation upon which the entire educational edifice, of which the curriculum structures, is constructed.

According to Pinar (1994), “Despite continuing if empty rhetoric linking education with democracy and politically involved citizenry,” schools still exist for the explicit and limited purpose of job preparation in an age of radical technological advancement (p. 235). This tends to produce “citizens” who are driven by economic advancement: it is a life sadly forged when the goals of accumulating private property and increasing one’s capital gains intersect with the exaggeratedly paranoid threat of material-monetary scarcity. Pinar (1994) argues that education in the last 100 years has not evolved in a positive manner, it has simply gone from “preparing citizens for jobs in an industrial economy” to preparing citizens for jobs in a corporate economy, but at base, “the economic function of schools remains unchanged” (p. 234). It appears that educational, pedagogical, and ultimately, curricular goals are still grounded in essential principles of utility. In line with this understanding, Brosio (2000) intimates the type of idealized democratic citizen that contemporary education is seeking to hypostatize, a subject that embodies the prototypical Caucasian corporate business executive, a pernicious model for education and curricula torn directly from the pages of the venture capitalist’s handbook that espouses product-and profit line of economic thought. Brosio’s work indicates that the trend in education seeks to ensure that America holds its privileged position (or at this point, regain it) in the global economy. As Brosio (2000) argues, there is a tendency at work in contemporary education that reduces “schooling to a mostly reproductive function - (of existing power, wealth, access, privilege relations” (p. 28).

I hold the deep belief that there is a pressing need for curriculum theorists, or better, philosophers of education and curriculum such as Brosio and Pinar, both of whom not only play the essential role of the diagnostician, but also, much like cultural physicians, offer prescriptive remedies for the ills of contemporary education. When Darling-Hammond, et al (2005) examine the types of students that parents and communities envision, they appear to be disparate models of the American “citizen,” as they reveal the aim and purpose of education in tripartite: (1) to enable students “to compete in a competitive workforce,” (2) to enable students to become “good citizens who can make a difference in the world,” and (3) to enable students “to develop themselves as individuals” (p. 172). If we are to trust the work of Pinar and Brosio, it appears as if the focus has been, throughout the history of our educational practices, on the first aim at the exclusion of the other two. I have tried briefly to point out that any thinking on curriculum matters must begin with fundamental questions, questions regarding the type of knowledge we value, and questions concerning what we want and expect from a good, moral, democratic citizen. The goal of “democratic” education, as Darling-Hammond, et al (2005) argue, should seek “to foster civic equality, tolerance, and recognition” (p. 174). However, we must first recognize and acknowledge the vast chasm separating what schools are selling as a democratic

ideal and what in reality has assumed the instantiation of this ideal: The business mogul, or as Pinar (1994) aptly describes this democratic archetype of citizenship, “White, male, shrewd, adaptive, adjusting to ‘reality’ in self-profiting ways” (p. 233).

In closing, I acknowledge that the professionals planning the curriculum, educating the students, and philosophizing the current state of education and its *futural* potential for reform should not feel the guilt that accompanies shouldering the entire burden of blame for the current crisis in American education. As Darling-Hammond et al (2005) demonstrate, the issue is far more complex than this short essay acknowledges. For example, a careful, well-developed critical analysis would need to take into consideration the fact that the design of the curriculum, and indeed, the entire system of education, is both “educational” and “political” in its makeup and is thus “decided in a variety of ways, through federal, state, and local policy decisions that govern school offerings, curriculum content, and student assignments to various schools and programs, among other things” (p. 172). Education, and its reform, is a group effort, and at times, it appears to lie beyond the control of those who are most needed in the process, namely, the teachers. The argument can convincingly be made that in many ways educators and education professionals are extremely limited in what they can do in the effort to reform the educational system from the ground up. Perhaps this issue might serve as the subject-matter for future thinking in the direction of the philosophy of curriculum study.

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