



# The Curriculum and the Role of Educational Leaders

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In a democratic society what should be the aim of the curriculum? Given its aim, what should schools teach and measure? Historically, what has been included or excluded from the curriculum? What has been the impact of inclusion or exclusion? What has been and should be the focus of educational reforms? What is the role of educational leaders? These and many other questions like them confront school leaders today.

The answer to these questions begins with an understanding of the purpose of education. To start, education is more than a mental discipline; it is more than performance on a test. The educational curriculum encompasses more than reading, writing and arithmetic. The education extends beyond imparting and acquiring knowledge or for that matter completion of a course of study. Education involves the harmonious development of the whole person in the process of advancing egalitarian democratic concepts of social justice while contesting dominant and oppressive ideologies, practices and structures. Education then should facilitate conscientization. In other words, via the educational curriculum, people should learn to question society, see through versions of the truth that teach people to accept unfairness and inhumanity, and become empowered to envision, define, and work toward a more humane society (Sleeter & Grant, 1999). This crafting of the curriculum suggests that one of the aims of the curriculum is to prepare students to become critical thinkers with the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

Currently, education functions as society's productive system (Posner, 2004) and its curriculum the means of achieving the dominant culture's goals of maintaining the status quo. The hegemonic secret sites for preserving middle class privileges, dismantling egalitarianism and implementing other totalitarian acts are hidden in the open. It is the American schools (Pinar, 2012). Nonetheless, schooling should encourage critical thinkers to confront educational injustices that are by-products of totalitarianism, dismantle systems of oppression and restructure

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institutional learning. For the education to operate in this manner requires its curriculum adopt a social justice agenda. Absent of this agenda, schooling and its curricular reform movements have become and will continue to be void of democratic principles of equality and equity.

Given this aim, what should schools teach and measure? Historically, Unruh and Unruh (1984) argue that patterns of recurring conservative and liberal themes have emerged in educational reforms. They suggest that the conservative curriculum that centers on teaching the basics at the expense of marginalizing the importance of other subjects is not new. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and its current counterpart, Race to the Top (RttT), are no exceptions. Both are reinventions of the same old conservative wheel. Today's content standards and high stakes testing movement, like prior back-to-the-basic reforms, have narrowed the focus of the curriculum. Its accompanying bandwagon of accountability spotlights students' acquisition of basic skills in reading and mathematics as measured by standardized tests (Unruh & Unruh, 1984). The restrictive nature of educational accountability has led to a technocratic mode of delivering the nation's curriculum that confines study to what test-makers have defined as skills and condemns students to an inferior education that was supposed to be enriched (Pinar, 2012). This mode of thought stresses a monolithic curriculum and conceptualization of schooling in America.

The constraining bias and discriminatory nature of these reforms grimly echoed in the state of American schools has led to a disparate academic impact for many American students. The carnage of bodies strewn over the educational landscape as a result of practices that have led to achievement and discipline gaps is an atrocity. Troubled by the prescriptive curricula, standardized pedagogy and privileged knowledge, educational leaders should address how the outcomes of many reform movements disconnect and distance students from the aim and

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purpose of education. School leaders, therefore, must critically reflect on the actual fairness of these reportedly comprehensive, value-neutral and color-blind reform efforts. I would argue that there needs to be a broader scope, a higher aim for the curriculum compared to those expressed in today's reform movements. In a democratic society in which hegemonic discursive practices lead to oppression and schools function as one of the primary perpetrators, the leadership style required to navigate this terrain must have at its epicenter a social justice agenda.

A social justice agenda could prevent paradigm shifts that continue to reassert new models of the same old wheel. A social justice agenda of schooling requires a reconceptualization of the curriculum, a curriculum that moves from course objectives to complicated conversations (Pinar, 2012). In this context, the historical, social, moral, cultural and political implications of the legitimacy of the content included and excluded from the curriculum (Posner, 2004) is the part of the complicated conversations. The goal of the curriculum should not be to create students who are slaves to the masters of dominant epistemologies but rather students who possess breadth of exposure, the courage of conviction to wrestle against injustice and the readiness to act in ways that would resuscitate democratic principles.

In other words, the curriculum should be designed to create and develop critical thinkers, and not mere reflectors of others' ideas. These thinkers should be taught how to deconstruct and reconstruct multiple knowledges, thus ensuring that their learning is not based on a single discourse. Instead of social justice being the current sacrificial lamb of the curriculum, it could become a means of resisting the reproductive agency of hegemonic discursive practices. The educational curriculum of a democratic society should purposefully teach students to challenge and eradicate every power-privilege relationship and decision-making process that leads to

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inequality and inequity. Sleeter & Grant (1999) assert that practicing democracy in schools means learning to articulate one's interests and to use schools as a base for local social action projects that draw together diverse groups to accomplish something for the community.

Educational leaders should work towards achieving such democratic objectives, attaining its goals and advancing every branch of its ideologies.

The daunting state of education demands leaders who have a deep-seated commitment to social justice schools. Educational leaders need to deconstruct hegemonic structures shaping schools. Unpacking the language and practices embedded in the curriculum is essential for navigating issues that stymie educational opportunities for all of America's citizenry. By doing so, leaders can become bellwethers in conceptualizing and implementing socially justice systems. Education and its leaders need to become re-creators of democracy, providing a path of continual progress towards equity, equality and social justice. Leaders for social justice in education should combat as well as deconstruct the role and function of the curriculum. Leaders should critically analyze and challenge historical and current educational reform curricula, contextualize the languages of both discourses, muster the courage to ask disturbing questions that irritate dominant powers, contradict national rhetoric and seek to push an alternative vision of the curriculum.

These leaders should also reflect on their role in propagating social inequalities and injustices by interrogating the meanings of their praxis. Because as Eisner (1979) suggests, "schools teach far more than they advertise" (p. 102). He advises that educators not only consider the explicit and implicit curriculum but also the hidden curriculum, what is taught but not formally acknowledged. Schools' explicit, implicit and hidden curricula socialize children to a set of values and shape the content of what students learn. As a result, Eisner (1979)

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maintains students should be taught to critically analyze “text materials to discern the kinds of social values that are being promulgated within the materials that students and teachers employ” (p. 100). Hence, in the process of selecting curricular items, leaders should never suggest that instructional materials equally reflect identity markers (i.e., race, gender, class and ability). They should strive to use materials and make decisions that mirror of the contributions of a heterogeneous school community in which differences are equally considered, welcomed, acknowledged, respected and integrated, even if not completely understood. By embedding a social justice agenda in the curriculum, leaders can secure a means of including processes for critical appraisal of possible curricular biases (Eisner, 1979) and reinforce the importance of social justice. Eisner (1979) argues that what subjects are taught and how much time is devoted to them contributes to the perception of their significance and value. A social justice agenda should be valued and embedded in the school’s curriculum.

Injustices perpetuated by curricular materials, practices, and processes dictate a leadership style that focuses on equality and equity. Educational leaders should question socially structured processes that produce unequal distributive patterns in institutions of learning. Unabashedly, educators should use their agency to support equal educational opportunity for all. Whether this means providing the incentives to counteract inequalities or investing in environments reflective of equality, makes no difference. Tanner and Tanner (1995) contend that “Access to a public school does not guarantee access to knowledge” (p. 9). Consequently, leaders should ensure equitable access to educational opportunities that can lead to the social capital needed for the betterment of the community.

Concepts of equal educational opportunity should embrace multiple meanings and the elasticity to extend level of opportunities based on causality and need. Fairness demands it.

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Equalizing access to educational opportunities and providing curricular resources that could disband hegemonic oppressive and unequal power structures are principle features of educational leadership. Educators committed to equality and equity should, as a result, expand their praxis beyond the allocation of resources and embrace issues of social organization in curriculum development. They should ask critical questions about dominant oppressive structures that create, maintain and reproduce discriminatory distributive patterns and representations in curricular materials. They should be willing to widen any narrow conceptual scope of social justice that fails to stretch the distributive discourse to include nondistributive issues of institutional curricular decision-making structures and processes. Leaders could then reimagine the distributive picture of social justice by adding a broader, process-oriented picture of justice.

Another task of schooling, I believe, is to provide a democratic environment for curriculum development that serves as the foreground for preparing students to have a voice and vote in a democratic society. Educational leaders should be organizing schools to be places safe and free for learning, where open and honest dialogue of popular and unpopular issues can be discussed without fear of adverse consequences. In these environments, all representative voices, not just those of the elite, are a part of the curriculum discussions. Educational leaders should promote and provide opportunities for fair group deliberation that facilitates the rich dialogues required for this task. McCutheon (1995) hails group deliberation as a means of facilitating curriculum planning and development, particularly because of the dialogue emerging from the conflicts that pepper the process. During curriculum deliberation, she suggests, a group conceives a problem, creates and weighs alternative solutions, develops a set of agreed upon interrelated ideas, values and norms and selects or develops the best course of action. She adds that deliberation creates the curriculum text under development and the subtext or the set of

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agreed upon norms and social rules for proceeding. Thus, group deliberation should be among the most valued democratic processes occurring schools.

Because of the socially constructed nature of knowledge, it is imperative that deliberation include counternarratives. The discord can be used to create a curriculum inclusive of the many diverse groups populating American schools. Ignoring the importance of social justice in the group deliberation process and the need for the voice and agency of the non-majoritarians would downplay the significance of their contributions. Conflicts between the majority and non-majority should be viewed as pertinent components of the deliberation process. Variances in opinions, values, beliefs and actions are all by-products of different narratives. The more dissimilar the voices are, the more diverse the conflict can become. That being the case, discord is the driving force behind the curricular wheel constructing the social knowledge building blocks needed to form a curriculum. Conversely, its absence can significantly hamper the breadth, depth, diversity and quality of the discussion required for comprehensive curriculum development.

Alternative voices also spur the controversial discussions needed to deconstruct and reconstruct the socially contextualized and legitimized knowledge of the dominant culture. Problematic and fragmented, I would argue, is a homogeneous hegemonic group deliberation process. If the curriculum should be built through group deliberation and conflict prompted by individual idiosyncratic theories (McCutcheon, 1995), multiple voices from multiple groups are necessary to substantiate and solidify the process. Fundamental to the process is a social justice agenda that ensures all voices are included in the deliberation.

No voice is marginalized or more influential than any other; nor is any one vote more powerful than any other. Voice and vote provide the plethora of information needed for the

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democratic decision-making and the balance of power that hegemonic structures resist. The voice and vote of multiple counternarratives are used to develop culturally relevant curricula, socially justice policies, fair discipline practices, valued constructed knowledge and the culturally sensitive pedagogy that should be implemented in schools. When counternarratives are eliminated, the curriculum is severely hampered. Hence, leaders should provide a system of accountability unlike the current educational system but rather one that emphasizes a wide segment of the school community direct deliberative participation in all aspects of the curriculum development. The broadening of involvement is crucial to the quality of the curriculum, the level of inclusiveness of participants in its development and the assurance of empowering the disempowered often marginalized by the current curriculum.

Today, the curriculum should extend beyond students' performance on reading, writing and mathematical assessments. It should include other epistemologies such as social justice agenda that counters current discursive practices. The results can transform students and educators from consumers to change agents and schools from reproductive hegemonic agents to democratic socially just organizations. In this way, the curriculum prepares students to have the voice and vote that begins in school and continues throughout a lifetime. Education and its curriculum then become the democratic vehicles that provide equal and equitable learning opportunities designed to create critical thinkers who uphold democratic educational principles. Educational leaders become the drivers of the vehicles for which the learning outcomes of the curriculum are equity, equality and justice for all.

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