

Curriculum Windows: What Curriculum Theorists of the 1960s Can Teach Us About Schools and Society Today

reviewed by [William J. Davis](#) – January 16, 2015

Title: Curriculum Windows: What Curriculum Theorists of the 1960s Can Teach Us About Schools and Society Today

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In *Curriculum Windows: What Curriculum Theorists of the 1960s Can Teach Us About Schools and Society Today*, Thomas Poetter and seventeen of his university students demonstrate the common tendency in the field of curriculum studies—and particularly curriculum history—of looking backwards across familiar territory. Using the metaphor of a window, Poetter and his students examine today's schools through the perspectives of notable curriculum theorists of the 1960s. At their best, *Curriculum Windows'* student contributors draw on what Garrett (1994) called “the successes and failures, the folly and wisdom of their predecessors” as they discuss issues of today's schools (p. 395). Armed with such folly and wisdom, as well as the diverse perspectives presented by Poetter's students, readers will find themselves stepping out from behind the window of the present to make changes for a better future.

Although readers will most likely identify a series of familiar topics and themes, *Curriculum Windows'* seventeen chapters are only explicitly bound by their respective bridges between the 1960s and present-day. Each of Poetter's students examines a single work from one of the 1960's well known theorists; readers familiar with curriculum history will doubtlessly recognize many of the sources, such as Jerome Bruner, W.E.B. Du Bois, Elliot Eisner, and Hilda Taba. While an anthology of these theorists' works is useful enough, Poetter's students go beyond merely summarizing; they bring their own diverse perspectives to analyze today's schools and the

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current challenges—some of which have stubbornly persisted from the 1960s onward.

Despite the wide array of perspectives, many of the critiques follow paths already well trodden by scholars. Perhaps the biggest theme throughout *Curriculum Windows* is advocacy for teacher autonomy. Given the movement towards centralized decision making that began in the 1960s, and subsequent increased federal involvement in education, it is not surprising that many of *Curriculum Windows*' chosen theorists—as well as Poetter's students—staunchly criticize standardized curricula. Leigh Ann Fish calls for innovation and creativity in Chapter Four and Jocelyn Weeda draws from A.S. Neill's (1960) *Summerhill* in Chapter Sixteen; both argue for greater choice and freedom in the curriculum and schools in general. Standardized assessment schemes are also highlighted as one way in which curriculum and teacher autonomy are simplified and reduced; in Chapters Two and Six, Scott Sander and Mark O'Hara blame the use of instructional and behavioral objectives for their foundational contributions to the standards and testing movement in the United States.

Resistance could also be considered a theme of *Curriculum Windows*. Pushing back against the ever-expanding wave of testing, Ryan Gamm draws from Postman and Weingartner's (1969) *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* in Chapter Twelve to advocate for resistance within the current school system. Mary Webb focuses on combating inequalities in schools via the lens of James Herndon's (1968) *How It Spozed To Be*, and several other chapters engage with the significant political and social movements of the 1960s.

Instead of treating the past and present as museum displays, where change is expressly forbidden, Poetter's students seek to provide readers with suggestions and alternatives they can employ to change the scenery outside their own school windows. At times, the offerings grow quite tired and familiar, as they have frequently appeared in curriculum literature since the 1960s. For instance, *inquiry or problem-based learning* is mentioned in no fewer than six chapters. While some authors are optimistic regarding the use of approaches like inquiry learning “a second time

around” (p. 35), the reality is that they have been repeatedly—even continuously—debated throughout the last 50 years. More distressingly, despite regular calls for inquiry learning, the field still shows resistance to change. Though Hayes, Sanders, and Lewellen trace the development of inquiry learning to Bruner’s (1960) *Process of Education*, the general tenor of curriculum and pedagogy has since traveled far in the opposite direction. Perhaps it is more important to think of ways to change the view outside the window, rather than to hold on to the windows of the past.

That said, one cannot claim that Poetter’s *Curriculum Windows* wholly lacks new perspectives—Precious Gawanani’s contribution serves as one such example. In Chapter Thirteen, Gawanani examines John Goodlad’s (1966) *School, Curriculum, and the Individual* in the context of a 100% primary school completion rate in her native Malawi. She identifies Goodlad’s views on student differences, and how those views conflict with the organization of most schools—particularly those that fixate on student promotion and retention. Yet student differences are lost in Malawi’s centralized, top-to-bottom educational hierarchy, which Gawanani claims has long struggled to provide equal access to schooling for students living in rural areas. To this end, Gawanani suggests the use of multi-graded schools in Malawi’s rural areas, which would allow greater opportunities for schooling. She moves beyond merely echoing Goodlad’s suggestions, and advocates for significant changes to teacher education, as the current system fails to prepare novice teachers in curriculum adaptation and teaching methods necessary for multi-graded schools with multiple teachers per classroom. Additionally, she encourages student teachers to work in rural areas as aides, both to support students and accrue valuable classroom experience. In this way, Gawanani utilizes the lens offered by Goodlad to devise an entirely new window view, as opposed to strictly relying on past advice.

In order for curriculum history to help inform the present and future, “we should seek to develop diverse and vivid memories” (Garrett, 1994). Poetter’s *Curriculum Windows* answers this call, and brings together a wide range of perspectives from the past and present. Rather than summarize the

arguments of various 1960s curricular theorists or describe the wealth of social and political challenges, Poetter's students seek to bring both of these elements forward into an analysis of the present. In doing so, Poetter and his students demonstrate the true value of curriculum studies—what Garrett (1994) described as an understanding of “how knowledge of past educational practices and ideas can assist our understanding of today and improvement for the future.”

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