

**Re-framing, Re-imagining, and Re-tooling Curricula from the Grassroots:
The Chicago Grassroots Curriculum Taskforce**

Isaura B. Pulido

Northeastern Illinois University, USA

Gabriel Alejandro Cortez

Northeastern Illinois University, USA

Ann Aviles de Bradley

Northeastern Illinois University, USA

Anton Miglietta

Chicago Grassroots Curriculum Taskforce,
USA

David Stovall

University of Illinois at Chicago, USA

This article explores the work of the Grassroots Curriculum Taskforce (CGCT), a Chicago-based collaborative that engages in collective production of curricula that more adeptly capture the cultural, economic, and political realities of Chicago Public Schools' students. We first examine the collaborative processes CGCT undertook with parents, teachers, students, community members/activists, and educational researchers to produce their first unit, Urban Renewal or Urban Removal (URUR). The second section explores CGCT and Northeastern Illinois University's College of Education's collaborative effort to partner with practitioners, educators, students, and communities to invest in liberatory grassroots K-12 curriculum while becoming partners in its development. CGCT partnerships are firmly grounded in a framework of mutual respect for the knowledge and expertise that parents, students, teachers, and community members bring to bear on K-12 education. The final section highlights challenges encountered when engaging in grassroots efforts.

The purpose of this article is to document the work of the Chicago Grassroots Curriculum Taskforce (CGCT) as we partner with others to revolutionize the traditional educational model of classroom learning. We see developing culturally relevant curricula as critical to our personal and professional lives. In the spirit of community and collectivity, the following narrative is reflective of our combined voices as we choose not to refer to ourselves as individuals within the writing but instead focus on the processes and collaborations of CGCT as we engage in the work of developing community and curricula. At the same time, we highlight the work of individuals who have been instrumental to the development and work of CGCT. As a community-centered collaborative project, we would not be able to write about this work without acknowledging their contributions.

We begin our work with the understanding that schools and curricula have the ability to empower or disempower communities. Historically, working-class youth and youth of color have been underserved by the American educational system. At the same time, neoliberal policies arguing for the corporatization of knowledge are increasingly marginalizing these youth. We believe that if we are to counter this trend, we must create curricula with community members

that speak to local political, social, and economic conditions, while developing critical academic skills that equip youth to create change.

The processes described here are multifaceted and non-linear. Several components of our endeavor occurred simultaneously and/or idiosyncratically, though we structure this article into three consecutive sections. The first section contextualizes the need for grassroots curriculum development, as an outgrowth of larger educational reforms in Chicago and across the country. This section also identifies how CGCT operationalized these frameworks in developing our first curricular unit, *Urban Renewal or Urban Removal: A History of Chicago's Land Grabs and the Struggle for Home and Community (URUR)* (2012). The second section documents the university and community collaborations that have resulted as an outgrowth of CGCT efforts. The concluding section explores the challenges inherent in grassroots community collaboration.

The Chicago Context: Understanding the Need for CGCT

Documented extensively in the works of Lipman (2003, 2004, 2011), Saltman (2007, 2009), and Fine and Fabricant (2012), Chicago has been a hotbed for neo-liberal educational reforms, which have largely resulted in the further marginalization of low-income, working class communities of color. Rooted in the belief that free market economies provide solutions to most social, political, and economic concerns, neoliberal reforms are centered in the rights of the individual and the privatization of public services. Because these resources are (falsely) positioned as available to everyone, low-income, working class families of color are often blamed for not accessing these resources.

Through the Renaissance 2010 initiative implemented in 2004, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) targeted up to 70 “chronically underperforming” schools for “transformation” into 100 schools distinguished as charter, contract, or performance schools. This reform was advertised in terms of CPS moving to provide “choice” and “options” in the “education marketplace” (www.cps.edu/NewSchools/Pages/ONS.aspx). Significantly, one of the consequences of this initiative was to lessen the city’s financial commitment to education through the use of partners that could use their contributions to education as tax subsidies (through the federal tax code’s provision for charitable donations).

Alongside the shift towards neo-liberal educational reforms in Chicago and around the country, we have also witnessed a push towards test-based, standards-based, textbook-based curriculum. Among other concerns with such efforts, we note how the reforms tend to financially benefit four textbook companies: McGraw Hill, Harcourt, Pearson, and Houghton-Mifflin (Bracey, 2005 in Sleeter, forthcoming). Moreover, such curricular reforms “are part of a larger set of policies designed to further empower the most advantaged segments of society,” (Sleeter, forthcoming). That is, they reinforce the tradition in textbooks to prioritize Eurocentric knowledge and experience, while marginalizing the cultures of communities of color (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Nieto, 2000; Yosso, 2005; Zinn, 1980), sometimes pathologizing youth of color (Espinoza-Herald, 2003; Flores & Murillo, 2001; MacDonald & Monkman, 2005).

The Origins of the CGCT

Recognizing the current educational context of Chicago and similar urban spaces, CGCT is working to reframe traditional models of classroom learning for low-income youth of color by infusing curriculum with content relevant to their lives. As a local clearinghouse and publisher, CGCT seeks to bring students, parents, educators, and elders to the table to compile, publish, and advocate for culturally relevant materials in Chicago's schools and universities (grades K-16).

In the spirit of long-standing educational struggles, the Chicago Grassroots Curriculum Taskforce officially formed in 2009 to address the dismal and historic patterns of irrelevant materials and mis-education (Woodson, 1933) in our classrooms. As Chicagoans who have had a range of educational experiences, we began to pose to ourselves the following questions:

- What is taught in classrooms that supports the knowledge of who we are, where we come from, and where we need to go?
- Why are we, and most young Chicagoans, oblivious to Chicago's histories of people's struggles for justice?
- Why is the majority of curriculum Eurocentric? How did it get this way?
- What can educators and others do to reverse the mis-education of millions more?

Although formally initiated in 2009, CGCT's roots were planted three years earlier in a graduate level course at Chicago State University. The participants in the course, all practicing teachers in alternative schools, agreed with the assessment that Chicagoans learn very little about Chicago – and almost no history from a critical perspective. As a result, they decided to launch the Chicago Area Curriculum Exchange (CASE) in order to begin developing Chicago-focused curricula from the perspectives of historically marginalized peoples.

After meeting for about a year, the collective dissipated, but was resurrected when a young man named Derrick Anderson expressed interest in presenting Chicago history from a grassroots perspective at the Social Justice Student Expo (a local event held at the University of Illinois at Chicago). His presentation at the Expo helped to motivate others towards meeting regularly.

Several longtime Chicagoans heeded the call, including Myrna Garcia, Nzinga Hill, and Lindsay Smith. This group presented a workshop at the 2009 Teachers for Social Justice Curriculum Fair in Chicago. The presentation was called *The Battle for Relevant Curriculum – Creating a Social Justice Course on Chicago from the Grassroots by Us!* The response by educators and community members was overwhelming. People from across the city quickly joined the effort to produce a series of curricular units. The series was called *A People's Chicago: Our Stories of Change and Struggle*, and a group of six to eight people met regularly to design a prototypical unit of study that resulted in our first curriculum unit, *URUR* (2012).

As curriculum development ensued, CGCT grew exponentially over the next two years. A resource center/office space opened in the Uptown community in the northeast side of Chicago. A Steering Committee was formed. The organization became incorporated as a 501c(3). We also began to ground our work conceptually through scholarly literature on participatory action research (Camarrota & Fine, 2008) and critical, culturally relevant, liberatory pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 2009). Scholarly literature utilizing a critical perspective harnessed our efforts towards the transformative pedagogy we believe is needed as working-class

communities of color are, for the most part, locked out of decision-making when it comes to the implementation of educational policies and practices (Hood & Ahmed-Ullah, 2011; Lipman 2011). Moreover, the CGCT model incorporates the work of critical pedagogues and cultural relevance theorists (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008) and puts forth a pragmatic framework to do this work “on the ground.”

These understandings enhanced our vision of what curriculum should look like, as well as the academic skills it should develop. We began to develop our own framework, calling it the Grassroots Curriculum (GC) model, which is reflective of our belief that the process of developing curriculum is just as important as the final product. The GC model illustrates the ways in which students, parents, educators, and community members can and should be involved in curriculum development. This approach is especially important in light of shifting educational reforms that increasingly narrow curriculum and further marginalize knowledge systems along the lines of class and race.

Developing the URUR

Predating CGCT, an independent taskforce came together to draft a unit of study based on extraordinary changes to Chicago’s urban landscape due to gentrification and displacement. Based on the topic’s current relevance coupled with pronounced student interest and a near total lack of such curricular resources, we chose to move forward. Grounded in a democratic process, our group immediately emphasized the need to include numerous voices and narratives. We hosted a series of open meetings to obtain input on desired and needed content and curriculum. In sum, eight taskforce committee meetings were held with the original members and three larger community forums were held with an average of 25 attendees per session. Participants, mostly as attendees of prior workshops (Teachers for Social Justice [TSJ] Curriculum Fairs, 2009 and 2010), were notified of meetings through phone-calls, emails, and text messages. These meetings and workshops provided our guiding brainstorm, content outline, essential questions, key projects, learning activities, and key threads for the unit and CGCT—all of which were organized into our unit curriculum map (*URUR*, 2012).

Of the 155+ participants involved in the previously described aspects of the process, there were approximately 50 classroom teachers from Chicago Public Schools and alternative schools, 35 youth and community organizers, 30 parents, 25 community elders, and 20 high school students. Adding the original 48 students in dialogue with the two original educators in the Chicago State course, there were over 200 participants involved in this phase of developing the original unit.

A broad range of individuals and groups also participated in the next phase of work—determining the content, learning activities, visuals, and design of the curriculum and engaging in the editing process. For example, 21 high school students from David Steiber’s Urban Studies class at Team Englewood High School (CPS) got involved. With Englewood being ground zero for Chicago’s foreclosure, disinvestment, and poverty crises, these students contributed powerful poems and short essays. In addition, CGCT distributed a Call for Contributions (via email, a newsletter, and phone call blasts) to over 2,400 people. The call attracted nearly 100 direct contributors to the books and hip-hop mix CD that together comprise the entire *URUR* set. Contributors included approximately 22 classroom educators, 20 artists, 18 displaced residents,

15 college students (undergraduate and graduate), 12 high school students, five housing activists, and four university faculty.

URUR represents our vision of an academically rigorous, cross disciplinary, culturally relevant, justice-centered curriculum. It seeks to develop key historical understandings about Chicago's major land disputes. Simultaneously, it seeks to locate CPS students' experiences within contemporary processes of gentrification.

Collaborative Efforts: Building Community and Curriculum

The CGCT has built a network of over 200 volunteers and contributors through our Calls for Submission, presentations at dozens of local classrooms and educational events, listserv outreach, and book circles (Knowledge Parties). Participation is also garnered through seven active committees, all of which contribute to the publication process. Increasing our capacity to coordinate our efforts, two part-time staff members were hired in the fall of 2012.

URUR is being piloted at two local Chicago public high schools and is being used as a university-level curricular tool at five Chicago universities. Additionally, our dissemination process includes presentations to the Chicago Teachers Union. By casting a broad net, we are working to connect with as many educational stakeholders as possible, posing an alternative to traditional research methods that often privilege research agendas of university professors. In 2012 we were invited to present at a Founders Table workshop and a plenary session at the National Association of Multicultural Education (NAME). Christine Sleeter (forthcoming) and Greg Michie (2012) have included CGCT's work in their most recent books as models of "empowering," "democratic," and "social justice" curricula.

Grassroots Knowledge Parties

Beyond distributing thousands of flyers, hanging posters, meeting with school staff, and tabling at dozens of events, we have been organizing Knowledge Parties (KPs) to enhance distribution and utilization of *URUR*. Fourteen KPs took place between late February and May of 2013. We have held KPs in people's homes, cafes, community centers, local retail establishments, and even a bar. The sharing of *URUR* with the larger community from a grassroots approach seeks to counter the corporatization and market-driven approach to the dissemination and production of knowledge, fostering access to all community members. At every KP thus far, a participant has signed up to host the next KP. Throughout the process we've been able to gather 110 names of individuals interested in CGCT, simultaneously allowing for further access and exposure of grassroots curriculum to the larger Chicago community.

Activities in University Courses

While CGCT is currently collaborating with several universities across Chicago, the relationship with Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU) is the most developed. The collaboration between CGCT and NEIU began in 2010 when one of us became involved with the Inquiry to Action Group facilitated by CGCT through the local organization, Teachers for Social Justice. This opened the opportunity to connect our work to NEIU's College of Education. The collaboration aims to bridge theory and practice by prioritizing the development of culturally relevant social justice curricula in NEIU's teacher preparation programs.

The mission and vision of CGCT aligns with the Educational Foundations course, *EDFN 305: Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Urban Education*. By becoming aware of—and perhaps involved in—CGCT activities, students come to understand why and how educators should develop local and relevant content from students’ families, cultures, histories, communities, and experiences. The initial iteration of the collaboration began with one visit from a CGCT member to EDFN 305. During this 3-hour session, CGCT members shared with pre-service teachers the ways in which their philosophy of education frames their engagement with K-12 students and curriculum development. After this presentation, the education students were asked to engage in critical praxis via a group project in which they designed lesson plans grounded in culturally relevant pedagogy.

After the first collaboration, NEIU faculty and CGCT members identified areas in need of improvement that would serve to better support and facilitate education students’ engagement and success in developing culturally relevant curriculum. An outcome of these discussions was the development of the CGCT Toolkit (<http://grassrootscurriculum.org/index.php/curriculum/curriculum-toolkit>), which provides a wide array of resources from which students can develop their own culturally relevant curriculum.

Similar to the approach used by the CGCT, faculty and students in this course collaboratively identify a theme to address via curriculum projects. For example, during one class session, a CGCT member asked education students, “What are the issues facing young people today?” Students identified a variety of issues, including: violence, poverty, lack of living wage/sustainable jobs, and marginalization. The CGCT member then posed the question, “Are schools addressing these concerns?” Students replied with resounding “NO!” This became the point of entry for students enrolled in EDFN 305 for the next 15 weeks. The presentation by CGCT compliments the foundation and framework for the course readings, assignments, discussions, and activities.

The themes students identify in the course are similar to those identified by CGCT; these include Land, Community, and Urban Geography; Education Systems, Schools, and Learning; (Im)migration and Globalization; Labor, Industry, and Capitalism; The Streets, Law, and Criminalization; Healthy Living and Health Crises; Government, Elections, and Policy; Culture, Media, and Community. Once a theme is agreed upon, students are oriented to the toolkit and receive guidance on navigating the documents and ways to use the toolkit for their own curriculum development (e.g., unit map template, projects list, local resources list).

The instructors for this course (who are also CGCT members) work together with other CGCT staff to give students feedback on their projects. This practice allows both university faculty and other CGCT members to discuss the progress of the students while considering theoretical and practical aspects that should be highlighted or incorporated to further facilitate their development and understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy and practice. Students develop websites that highlight their curriculum projects (for samples, see <http://www.grassrootscurriculum.org>). They are also asked to provide feedback on the utility and accessibility of the CGCT Toolkit. This

feedback is then discussed by faculty and other participating CGCT members, serving to further inform and shape these curricular materials.

Although the majority of the students enrolled in EDFN 305 are aspiring teachers, one CGCT member has also taught the foundations course to students in the School Counseling Program. Students in this program use the toolkit to develop a counseling program or initiative based on student needs, which they identify through research into a particular school and community in Chicago. The work with the school counselors has been eye-opening; students noted that they have never been asked to think about the community in the context of their professional work. For CGCT, this is reflective of the broader disconnect between schools, communities, and programs in higher education. Thus, working with these students has offered another opportunity to think about the importance of dialogue and collaboration across all levels of education.

Forum for University Students

Collaboration between CGCT and NEIU's College of Education also led to organizing an annual event, *Creating Grassroots Education: A Collaborative Forum for Students*. Now entering its third year, this event is organized for several audiences, including undergraduate and graduate students at NEIU taking courses in the Educational Foundations Program, Educational Leadership and Development Program, and the *Grow Your Own Teachers Program (GYO)*, as well as students interested in NEIU's College of Education. Together, these courses and programs introduce students to critical readings in education while linking them to contemporary issues facing educators today at the intersections of race, class, and gender. This event is an opportunity to connect aspiring teachers and school counselors with practicing teachers/counselors, community activists/organizations, administrators, scholars, and students across the city of Chicago who are currently engaged in anti-oppressive, liberatory (Freire, 1970), humanizing, and culturally relevant education.

A primary goal of this event is to help students experience firsthand the relevance and practical applications of social justice education by introducing them to the work of the CGCT and connecting them with individuals engaged in such work. Through this collaborative effort, future and current educators are able to see themselves as change agents and advocates for social justice. Broadening the scope of how and where students learn encourages pedagogical practices that embrace all spaces as sites of inquiry and action. Lastly, it demands that future and current educators come to value, respect, and honor the knowledge of children/youth, families, and communities.

University Collaboration: Leadership Development

More recently, CGCT and the NEIU's College of Education have implemented transformative pedagogy components in the newly state-mandated Principal Endorsement Program for graduate students in the Department of Educational Leadership and Development. Using Gary Anderson's (2009) rationale that "participatory school restructuring cannot transform the educational experiences of marginalized students unless educators' beliefs and assumptions as well as relations of power in schools and communities are challenged," (p. 130), these components require students to do class projects that assess particular components in their school institution and local community. This includes using participatory action research methods, identifying current and potential community partnerships, and assessing human resource services.

Prospective school leaders will learn how to use a culturally relevant curriculum and become familiar with an advocacy-oriented leadership style that enhances authentic relationships with key partners in school curriculum, community relations, and institutional assessment skills. CGCT and the NEIU College of Education will assess the courses at the end of the semester, with the goal of improving the use of transformative pedagogy components.

CGCT's culturally relevant curriculum methods are primarily used in three classes required for the Principal Endorsement Graduate Program: Human Relations, Educational Research Design and Data Analysis, and Community Relations. The Human Relations course focuses on team building skills with an understanding of social concerns and stress factors. Students also learn about a variety of issues that pertain to race relations, cultural identity and diversity, the corporatization of education, social-economic inequalities, gendered identities, and stress management. All topics are designed to prepare future school leaders with an understanding on how current economic, political, and social conditions have disenfranchised low-income communities of color. The Educational Research Design and Data Analysis course focuses on a semester-long participatory action research project. Students learn how to analyze empirical data and use qualitative methods to design a professional development workshop for their peers. The purpose of the project is to prepare future school leaders to use research methods to strategically address school concerns while designing culturally relevant curricula. The Community Relations course has students develop a community relations campaign addressing a specific concern identified by community members. For this, students research the history of the surrounding community of the school where they are employed. From this exercise students are required to analyze school partnerships as well as local community organizations and then determine how they can be involved in the development of culturally relevant curricula. The final project has students create a resource guide on how to assess community needs while listing resources available to community members.

All transformational pedagogy components in the three Principal Endorsement Graduate Program courses are designed to introduce prospective school leaders to the patterns of demographic changes in the city of Chicago and its surrounding suburbs. This initiative is thus in line with CGCT's mission and vision to re-tool and re-imagine traditional models of education.

Constructing Bridges and Navigating Detours

As a group comprised mostly of educators and parents, with only a few of us having some organizing and a little publishing experience, we have experienced numerous challenges in building a grassroots curriculum development and publishing organization. Here we discuss our two most formidable challenges.

As a volunteer-based publisher, CGCT faced the challenge of finding skilled people to assist when needed (e.g., graphic designers, web designers, database creators), learning how to navigate the printing world (e.g., pricing, the language of the print industry, obtaining quotes from trusted places), and effectively organizing our pool of volunteers to accomplish the dozens of tasks that arise. It is all being forged by fire, or as Myles Horton (1990) says, "We make the road by walking."

Another challenge is getting schools to purchase curriculum and use it in classrooms. With each school in Chicago having autonomy over its curriculum choices, we need to build relations with schools one by one. Teachers are extremely busy—principals are even busier. Schools have limited budgets and the Chicago Public Schools budget is being cut continuously. We meet with teachers who reach out to us upon learning about CGCT’s work. These meetings usually occur during the teacher’s preparation period, after which they must take time to review the materials, find connections with their courses, discuss our work at the department level, and negotiate with their school leadership to purchase the CGCT materials. Without adequate but unimposing follow-ups, CGCT curriculum can quickly become an afterthought.

We are currently engaged in building meaningful curriculum relations with teachers from over 18 schools. Teacher interest is high, but budgets and principal approval may pose a challenge. Because we lack the resources of a large publishing house (e.g., sales reps, promotions, tech-savvy support), we must sacrifice tremendous amounts of time to get into schools and build bridges that support grassroots curriculum. In both cases, a larger staff of highly skilled people would be advantageous, especially when it comes to conducting mass outreach and school-based relationship building in a city as large as Chicago.

Our commitment to inclusive, grassroots curriculum transformation continues to develop and evolve. As a collective, we believe that it is impossible to enact real, sustained change without the efforts and voices of all community members. CGCT will continue to facilitate collaborative processes among educators, parents, students, community members, and higher education faculty in order to create, sustain, and expand spaces for the continued development and dissemination of tangible, justice-centered, grassroots products that reflect our commitment to re-frame, re-imagine, and re-tool curricula from the grassroots.

Isaura B. Pulido, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Inquiry and Curriculum Studies at Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago. E-mail: I-Pulido1@neiu.edu

Gabriel Alejandro Cortez, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership and Development at Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago. E-mail: G-Cortez@neiu.edu

Ann Aviles de Bradley, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Inquiry and Curriculum Studies at Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago. Email: A-AvilesdeBradley1@neiu.edu

Anton Miglietta is Director of the Chicago Grassroots Curriculum Taskforce in Chicago. E-mail: anton@grassrootscurriculum.org

David Stovall, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Educational Policy Studies and African-American Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago. E-mail: dostoval@uic.edu

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