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Reflection on Theory: Whose Knowledge, and the Hidden Curriculum

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***Abstract:** This opinion paper intends to elucidate the author's theoretical framework towards education and the goals of curriculum. The author utilizes various scholars' work to help form a silhouette of his beliefs and of what he feels a P-12 school curriculum should provide to students, as well as to outline how his theoretical disposition has shaped his choices as an in-service educator and Ph.D. student. For the purpose of this opinion paper, he defines school curriculum as the praxis and rituals that occur within the brick and mortar of our P-12 schools.*

The intent of this paper is to articulate my theoretical framework towards education and the goals of curriculum. It is worth noting that the theoretical framework I espouse is not philosophically, nor politically neutral. In fact, my framework is biased and has been crystallized through my life-experiences, educational attainment, and my personal encounters as an educator. Nonetheless, in this paper I call on and utilize various scholars' work to help support my arguments, thereby forming a silhouette of what my convictions are and what I believe a P-12 school curriculum should provide *all* students, as well as outlining how my theoretical disposition has shaped my decisions as an in-service educator and current Ph.D. student (Urban Education, Multicultural Studies).

For the purpose of this opinion paper, I will define *school curriculum* as the praxis and rituals that occur within the brick and mortar of our P-12 schools. What I like most about this porous definition is that it allows onlookers to realize that curriculum is multiform in nature—formal aspects and informal aspects that marry together to form the curriculum itself. This is significantly different from what some have come to consider school curriculum: a battery of district mandated programs of study.

It is worth citing Dr. Peter McLaren (2003, in *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*) when he declares:

From the perspective of critical educational theorists, the curriculum represents much more than a program of study, a classroom text, or a course syllabus. Rather, it represents the *introduction to a particular form of life; it serves in part to prepare students for dominant or subordinate positions in the existing society* [his emphasis]. (pg. 86)

I am of the same mind that school curriculum, using my previous definition, unfortunately serves to maintain the structural inequalities—the status quo—inherently insidious, nevertheless, inherently active in our current educational structure.

If we examine P-12 school curricula closely, it does not take long to ascertain *whose* knowledge is being taught, valued, and represented in schools nationwide. This hidden curriculum services white students, while disserves students of colorⁱ. A salient practice is the tracking of students—whereby, the curricula that students of color undergo inadequately prepares them for college. Another practice is the promotion of white students to take Advanced Placement (AP) courses in high school that may lead to receiving college credit for work completed in secondary school. My theoretical framework of education and the goals of P-12 curriculum are seen through a Critical Race Theory (CRT hereafter) lens.

CRT is the lens I use when I evaluate P-12 school curricula. As I mentioned previously, I believe school curriculum to be the praxis and rituals that occur within the brick and mortar of our P-12 schools. I believe a P-12 school curriculum should provide all students with contact with verdant educators and staff who value differences and who promote students to ask questions and produce knowledge rather than systematically regurgitate facts docilely.

This leads me to my belief that many school practices, while encompassed by P-12 curricula and widely accepted, need to be eliminated. First, school textbooks and school resources must provide multiple perspectives. In order for students to be adequately prepared for post-secondary life, there lies the need to help grow students' abilities to think critically and synthesize facts and/or opinions. It is incumbent that school curricula allow students to dialogue with one another, as well as with adults. This is a clarion for textbooks to accurately portray the lives our students live and the roles they will occupy in post-secondary life.

Second, rituals practiced in P-12 schools need to be representative of the rituals of the students. This calls for a cultural knowledge that transcends cultural sensitivity trainings and ethnic cheerleading. A harbinger of school success, I would argue, is the ability of school staff to understand the students it serves. This includes patterns of speech, vernacular, and modes of communication. This true understanding must go further than superficial, skin-deep knowledge; rather, it must be cultivated through democratic and socially just praxes in action.

Third, school curriculum needs to prepare *all* students. The practice of tracking students clearly underserves students of color. Curriculum must be challenging for all demographic groups represented in our P-12 schools (e.g. low-socioeconomic status, transgendered, gay and/or lesbian, disabled, students of color, etc.).

Curriculum continues to be structured around mainstream white, middle-class values. Whose needs do these values and curricula serve? Drs. Heather Hackman and Laura Rauscher draw attention to the fact that under the guise of *mainstream* curriculum

certain enclaves of students become marginalized through curriculum and praxis that are insensitive and inequitable. Hackman and Rauscher (2004) state:

[...] often under-funded [...] mandates across the nation leave many educators wondering how best to serve their students, particularly those students who do not fit into the *mainstream* [my emphasis] profile or curriculum. In today's schools, the needs of students with disabilities and members of other marginalized groups often go unmet, and as such, more inclusive educational approaches need to be adopted to ensure that all students have access to a solid education. (p. 114)

Curriculum, in my opinion, must be diverse and serve the needs of every student.

My theoretical disposition has shaped my decisions as an in-service educator and Ph.D. student. I am unable to stand silent and idle when I see inequality and injustice occurring in our schools. As a practicing teacher in the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), the largest school district in the state of Wisconsin with a dropout rate in the top 5 of the United States of America, I feel morally and ethically responsible to elect to break from systems of curriculum—i.e. textbook praxis—which detract from my students' learning while serving to maintain the status quo—the marginalization of students of color.

In closing, I feel obligated to state that as a current doctoral student and in-service educator I truly understand that providing all P-12 students with quality instruction and curricula is a large and enduring job. However, we must all come to consensus that school curriculum is the vehicle that serves to unite or divide our nation and our schools. Through purposeful, intentional, and unwearied decision-making processes, I am hopeful that school districts nationwide will be able to adopt/develop and create P-12 curricula

that are just and credible, not predicated on hidden curricula values, but rather on what best serves all of their students. These curricula are the praxes within the brick and mortar schools that will allow *all* learners to be best-educated.

References

Darder, A., Torres, R. D., & Baltodano, M. (2003). *The Critical Pedagogy Reader* (P. McLaren, Ed.). Great Britain: Routledge.

Hackman, H. W., & Rauscher, L. (2004). A Pathway to Access for All: Exploring the Connections Between Universal Instructional Design and Social Justice Education. *Equity & Excellence in Education* (37), 114–123.

¹The academy uses various definitions to determine who *students of color* are. I will racially designate students of color to include all students who are not non-Hispanic European Americans.

AUTHOR: Nicholas Daniel Hartlep is a Ph.D. student at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, where he is pursuing a degree in Urban Education and Multicultural Studies. His research focuses on urban educational reform as it relates to race, equity, and the improvement of education, especially at the collegiate level. Hartlep is a teacher in the Milwaukee Public Schools, the largest school district in the state of Wisconsin. Hartlep holds two degrees in education: a B.S. degree in teaching and an M.S.Ed. in K-12 education.