

Curriculum Reform and Teacher Education: The Loss of Innocence

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I have spent many months rethinking the recent curriculum reform in the United States. After several conversations with embattled colleagues, I decided to write this essay in hopes of introducing a conversation that placed curriculum change at the center of educational reform driven by policy decisions that agitate fear in teachers, schools, and parents (Carini, 2000). Vaclav Havel's *Unveiling* offers an excellent entrée into the conversation of curriculum reform and teacher education. In the play, which takes place in Michael and Vera's apartment in Czechoslovakia, Michael advises his guest, Ferdinand (Bedrich in the original play) Vanek on marriage. Michael tell him that

one shouldn't be indifferent to what one eats, one shouldn't be indifferent to what one eats on, and what one eats with, what one dries oneself with, what one wears, what one takes a bath in, what one sleeps on. And once any of these things start to matter, you'll find that something else suddenly matters too, and then another thing gets you, and so a whole sort of chain of things develops—. . . (Havel, 1993, 219)

In his play Havel links habits of life to the greater good and work that drives the human condition (Arendt, 1958). In this sense, the roots of curriculum should never be seen as indifferent in light of the darkness autocratic policies (high stakes testing, or NCATE) have on teachers, students, and communities. At its core, the essence of curriculum lies in difference and diversity of experience, which like simple acts described in *Unveiling* lend humanity to education and life (Freire, 1970).

Similarly, Phillip Jackson (1969) and Elliot Eisner (1990) emphasize learning existing in the hidden spaces of body and public conversations; while questioning quantified and measured learning feted by high stakes performance and management leading to certification (Illich, 1970). In *Learning Relations*, Alexander Sidorkin passionately writes about the latter. He states that "education is but an enterprise dedicated to the production of useless things" (2001, 12). In our schools, humaniza-

tion of individuals' learning habits of life occurs through the creation of public spaces that serve to foster faith in civil society. It is at this crossroads that educators must heed George Counts' (1932) warning and protect the spirituality that legitimizes the learning experience as organic and not as a set of rituals stimulated by the hegemonic state of fear—federal and state governments, Colleges of Education, and industry (for current explanations of similar situations see, Brantlinger, 2004; Carini, 2000).

In asking society to disregard its identity, we ask students to relinquish their humanity inside their schools. In this essay I attempt to distinguish space as a social aspect of education, see it as a force that shape the space we call school, and the ability of that public space to represent the needs and desires of the constituents it serves, tackling the essential foundations driving progressive education; seeing and living in the intersections between democracy, freedom, learning, and ownership indispensable to a modern civil state (Callejo Perez, Fain, & Slater, 2004).

I argue that *No Child Left Behind* and newly enacted federal/state policy has, sometimes unintentionally, legitimized and birthed reform movements that seek to raze the spiritual core needed to create symbiotic relationships between community, school, and individual. I criticize the appropriation of progressive language by the teacher education and the state that seek to de-legitimize teachers, students, and communities. I hope to address a unique aspect of public education that has been “reformed” by policy and how the curriculum maker has to respond in order to reclaim the place of dialogical conversations belonging to the public in our schools.

A Metaphor of Teacher Education

In “Power of the Powerless,” Vaclav Havel (1986) ponders about the state of mind of a fruit and vegetable store manager in a totalitarian state who places a sign with a slogan that reads “Workers of the World Unite!” on his storefront window. Havel asks: why does he do it? Is he making a statement about unity of all workers? Does he understand its meaning? Or has it been lost in years of ritualism? (p. 41). What the store owner understands is, that not placing the sign on his window communicates his desire to question the state; which risks imprisonment and even death. Further, I also assert that the store owner goes about his everyday business without thinking about his condition; shopping, eating, walking, etc. He feels at one with his brothers and sisters, institutions, and world. He has a moral and spiritual connection to his enterprise. However, his consolidated view of society is far from the actual reality; one which is plunging deeper into crisis. For example in the global economy, differences between haves and have not grow; including in the US, the “achievement gap” in schools. So how do we spiral deeper into this schism without reflection; why as Havel asks, “are people in fact behaving in the way they do?” He concludes, that “for any unprejudiced observer, the answer is . . . self-evident: they are driven by fear” (Havel, 1986a, 4).

In the last school quarter I had the chance to speak to Martha DiSilva, a Jamaican teacher in a Miami, Florida elementary school who questions her role as an educator

after what she described as an excruciating three hour in-service about the merits of scripted reading and the empowerment of the child and teacher knowing what was required before it occurred. Since I have always taught doctoral classes in curriculum studies, or undergraduate courses in foundations, I rarely had the pleasure of speaking or teaching in-service teachers, or first-year teachers returning to graduate school. Most of the people I deal with have been around for a while and always seem embattled; more so in the last year. I described the experience to colleagues who seem at odds with my “negative” and “critical” picture of the wonderful art of teaching.

It was not until recently that I made a connection to my disassociation; my negative takes on education versus the positive notion of teacher education espoused by “real teacher educators.” It occurred while I was writing and researching for a book about an inner city elementary school in Omaha, Nebraska and saw my disconnection.

“Workers of the World Unite!”

Education, more precisely school curriculum, has become an endeavor of death; a living death similar to that seen in the grotesqueness of George Romero or in the fatalism of George Orwell. Here I was in the midst of this “failing school” in Omaha that could never get beyond a 38% passing rate (a 50% rate was needed) on the California Achievement Test (CAT); a test where “School begins in May” was the grammatically correct answer in the section dealing with grammar and verb tenses. In one classroom with twenty students, this question was failed by over 90% of third graders because for them school actually begins in September. I sat in excruciating pain, sometimes felt by ethnographers watching a train speed toward the car on the railroad tracks and not acting because it would disturb the research. I gazed at a frustrated third grade teacher read from a script of the CAT on procedures for determining the best choice to fill in the blank of an inane but grammatically correct sentence. I saw the joy of teaching drained from her, the same expression and color on her skin as I have seen on beached porpoises in the Florida coast, struggling to survive by doing what they always did; going through the motions without any meaning. It reminded me of stories my mother told me about living in a political prison on an island off of Cuba as a teenager for her views. She reminded me why she stood up against the government; she said that “I knew I would be dead anyway,” so “better to die for a cause alive than die at home safe.” She understood the essence of Havel’s *Unveiling* and *Power of the Powerless* about being alive by simply seeing what was around you.

This failing school that will never meet the minimum requirements (it did in May 2004 when 50% of the kids passed the CAT), was not a failing school; it possessed 96% daily attendance rate, would get over 300 parents for school functions, received financial and social help from its surrounding community, and had a low 3.5% (figures from 2000-04) teacher turnover rate. By all these standards this was a successful elementary school, yet it was a failing school because of the CAT. What I saw were

teachers who viewed their professional lives being slowly drained by the sieve of best practice, essential curriculum, and broad criterion reference assessment.

Curriculum and Change

Before I continue, let me define curriculum for the purpose of this essay and our larger question of its role in teacher education. For me curriculum is an existing set of goals and values that gain life through an exchange between teachers and learners. Curriculum is, as Dewey (1934) defines the expressive object, an expression that signifies both an action and its result (82). The product of curriculum, the (art) object that results from the process is a correlational operation uniting the arts of science (curiosity), space, identity, and expression by individuals in a conversation (teacher-student) with each other and their surroundings. Thus, curriculum in its essence is a resuscitated discourse from a teacher attempting to humanize philosophical constructs for a group of learners. I do not want to visit the debate between normative and postmodern notions of curriculum or where it exists in this short essay. Instead, I want to assert that the act of teaching makes the invisible (formal and hidden curriculum) visible. It is as Pat Carini (1979) and Thomas Barone (1989; 2001) write; that teacher is the art of seeing the invisible in learners. As a curricularist, it is where I see the spiritualism of the field, the essence of school life. As Dewey (1934) states,

I do not think that the dancing and singing of even little children can be explained wholly on the basis of unlearned and unformed responses to then existing objective occasions. Clearly there must be something in the present to evoke happiness. But the act is expressive only as there is in it a unison of something stored from past experience, something therefore generalized, with present conditions. (71)

John Dewey explores the notion of experiences and values in little children and continues to explain how with mature persons “the reverse in the case” (1934, p. 71). When those memories are revisited though, “it is so on a deeper level and with a fuller content of meaning” (71-72). Dewey continues that “even though after long incubation and after precedent pangs of labor, the final expression may issue with the spontaneity of the cadenced speech or rhythmic movement of happy children” (72). It is our responsibility to begin to revalue those educational meanings that are important, recover our sense of meaning, and re-invent teacher education. According to Dewey, art’s proper place is alongside science. Teacher Education and curriculum reform have forgotten that people are the essential element of the educational enterprise.

Losing Our Innocence

Using the definition above as an undergirding principle for my argument, I have come to several conclusions why we do not see the meaning of the sign “Workers of the World Unite!” in our windows. Like the grocer in Czechoslovakia, teachers and teacher educators (individuals charged with sustaining the curriculum) exist in a

totalitarian structure. It has its history, rituals, institutions, and language. Like the former Soviet bloc country, bureaucracy becomes the vessel by which one advances. Like the former bloc country blind allegiance (moral or amoral) becomes the notion by which we survive. The role of the informant, who is rewarded for his vigilance on his neighbor, is central to the survival of the totalitarian state. Like a totalitarian state, schools redefine terms such as collaboration, team, professionalism, standards, and democracy for purposes of control; like religious organization do with faith. Teachers therefore are inculcated into this system of oppression through slow and tedious reeducation. They are indoctrinated into a preordained professional structure that expounds subservient behavior through state rituals of service, such as portfolios.

However, this does not get at my original problem, why do teacher educators who work with new teachers not agree with my assessment of the dehumanization of the professional? I struggled with this conflict for a long time, but finally was able to assess some reasons why. First, teacher education has become an oppressive enterprise, many programs extend well beyond four years of college for dismal pay, teaching is based on performance of predetermined rituals (the appearance of the lesson plan supercedes the content), and teacher preparation is rife with rituals that on the surface seem absurd but serve the purpose of indoctrination into the school culture.

How did this happen? First, university faculty has dumped undergraduate teacher education in the search for research money. This research money, controlled by funding agencies whose belief on what counts as education is narrower each day (NSF, USDOE) provide moneys not for liberating research but for training grants that seek to improve teacher education through homogenization. Second, teacher education has been turned over to adjuncts and instructors who are usually retired public school administrators, or sometimes teachers. Attached to this second career is the “prestige” of a college position and extra financial support. This is an absurd notion, letting the bosses educate the workers. UAW would never let the Ford’s instruct the welders on their duties to the Ford Motor Company. One wonders if they would encourage free and critical thought from their students. Accordingly, they attempt to duplicate a process that has worked very well for public schools, fear channeled through “practicum experiences” and “oral story telling from the field.” In March 2005 (<http://edschools.org/pdf/Final313.pdf>), *Educating School Leaders*, authored by Arthur Levine attacked educational programs as “racing toward the bottom,” their curriculum and research as the “weakest of all the programs at the nation’s education schools,” and nothing more than oral stories (p. 13)

I now understand why there is such a disconnection between veteran teachers and young teachers. In changing school world, veteran teachers are like ELL kids in schools; they know the culture but just cannot understand it or its language. This change was slow and banal; it did not come from our current federal administration or will it die with it. It will not end until teacher educators take back their enterprise from the usurping bureaucrats.

Possibilities for Change

Teacher education has lost its sense of self, play, and life. In focusing on methods and not interpretation we lose the essence of what curriculum is: the search for knowledge. When we engage in human inquiry, we must seek to enhance meanings. When we engage in education we want to problematize meanings and values under which learning has occurred. I, like Hannah Arendt, espouse the idea of fragmentary historiography, “one that seeks to identify the moments of rupture, displacement, and dislocation in history. Such fragmentary historiography enables one to recover lost potentials of the past in the hope that they may find actualization in the present” (Passerin d’Entreves, 1994, p. 4). For Arendt, it is necessary to redeem from those past “moments worth preserving, to save fragments from past treasures that are significant for us” (p. 4). Only by “operating against the grain of traditionalism and the claims of conventional historiography can the past be made meaningful again, provide sources of illumination for the present, and yield its treasures to those who search for them with ‘new thoughts’ and saving acts of remembrance” (Passerin d’Entreves, 1994, p. 5).

It is here where schooling, specifically community schooling, can make a difference. Teacher education must include the education of how to include after-school and community outreach programs; helping integrate young learners into our community. Teacher education should also understand that politics and economics drive schooling, leading to a conflict between individuals’ home and school life. One such issue is the prevalence of state standards. Due to the pressure exerted by federal and state governments, local districts have become embroiled in preparing standardized curriculum and assessment that does not value the richness and possibilities of diversity. Schools are being forced to make a choice between addressing diversity and raising test scores. If schools are to change, so must stereotypes of others who are different. It has long been a necessity to include all members of a community in order for it to survive. Recently, new issues of difference have pressed the meaning of diversity beyond the question of race, to include other “invisible” traits, such as sexual preference, mental health, religion, private culture, etc. In order for change to occur and be lasting, reeducation of teachers must take place. As we begin to deal with the changing landscapes education, it is a requisite that issues of sustained access to equitable education be opened for the thousands whose life experiences occur within our cities.

Education has to be among the highest priority human needs for a number of reasons, including the empowerment of people to change their life situations, the enhancement of national economic growth, and the promotion of sustainable development. For these reasons, schools need to be seen as “communities” and not merely buildings where state standards are passed down. If we begin to treat our schools as communities, we need to adopt principles of early outreach to our communities and children; relationship between scholarship and communities’ needs; and emphasizing teachers as community leaders. As Philip Jackson (1969) and

Peter McLaren (1998) explore in their groundbreaking studies; school culture is the struggle for identity experienced not in classroom practice but in everyday moments of fragmented complexity, re-imagined and relived alongside the classroom experiences. The larger question of the role of schooling for communities and their children, is as Vaclav Havel (1986b) envisioned; entwined in the liberty to have ownership of self, a revolution in the sphere of moral consciousness occurring with active participation in a democratic society. The undergirding foundation of a democracy should lay in its democratic institutions, of which schools should be central (Dewey, 1916).

I propose a set of experiences that extends beyond subject areas and methods; a model for critical education that reaps our personal narratives to understand the contradictions in the context of schooling and promotes social change within the educational system and the school culture itself. This implies addressing the social and historical contexts of schooling. Schools have a responsibility to promote the authentic conversation that nurtures tools of agency for individuals involved in teaching and learning. Discussions on critical theory must include the words and lives of others, students, teachers, community members; involve critical decision-making; and ultimately transformation. These include our children and their experiences. Teacher education has to integrate these experiences in their courses, so that new teachers attend to differences of young learners as a cognitive process of the curriculum. Then and only then can we regain our place and begin to see like Michael in Vaclav Havel's *Unveiling*.

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