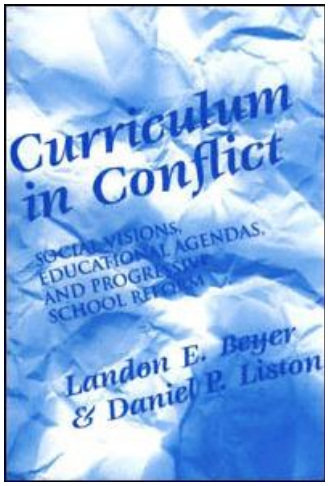

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Curriculum in Conflict:

Social Visions, Educational Agendas, and Progressive School Reform

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To our children:
Nate, Leah, and Emma
Ira and Matthew

Contents

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Introduction

It has become much clearer, as a result of numerous historical, sociological, interpretive, and conceptual studies completed during the last quarter century, that changes in the curriculum of both public schools and universities are often tied to broader social, political, and economic shifts (Apple, 1979; Apple & Weis, 1983; Beyer & Apple, 1988; Franklin, 1986; Kliebard, 1986). From the decline of "faculty psychology" and mental discipline almost a century ago, to the problems associated with the Great Depression and the world wars, to the development of a cold war ideology that became more strident with the launching of *Sputnik*, to current concerns with an increasingly multicultural population, individuals and groups have sought to alter educational institutions and their curricula in an attempt to respond to what they have taken to be crises in the social order. In contemporary U.S. society, the development of the "new math," the push to return to "the basics" and to articulate a "new basics," the movement to foster "choice" and promote closer alliances between businesses and schoolsall reflect this tendency for the curriculum to become an instrument for avoiding perceived social perils or for strengthening particular social initiatives. It is not an overstatement to say that we cannot understand the construction and reconstruction of public school and college curricula if we do not understand how they are intimately tied to these larger social currents and cross-currents. The "crisis reports" of the 1980s, the meetings of the National Governors Association, and now the attempt to establish national standards for the evaluation of schooling through the National Education Goals Panel are only the most recent examples of a longstanding pattern of reevaluating and reforming the school curriculum so as to alleviate some current or future shortcomingwhether real or imagined.

The curriculum field as an area of inquiry with a formal status within higher education has also undergone periodic and substantive revisions over the course of its history, in response to similar institutional pressures and social forces. Beginning more or less in the middle of the second decade of this century, the field of curriculum studies has been affected both by debates involving those working within the field as well as in allied disciplines and by the changing social landscape within which it functions. Schol-

arly debates and social shifts themselves cannot be neatly separated, as one often responds to or serves to orient the other. One of the realities that makes curriculum studies so exciting, as well as at times so exasperating, is the relatively fluid, permeable boundaries that separate it from other academic pursuits and from ongoing social, political, cultural, and economic phenomena.

Scholarly and public debate increasingly focused on both public school and college curricula during the 1980s. Consistent with general political and cultural shifts, the mainstream discussion of educational problems during this decade tended to promote the perspective of the political right wing, or the "new right" (Shor, 1986). For example, Allan Bloom (1987) and E. D. Hirsch (1988) argued that the legacy of the 1960s left schools with a watered-down curriculum, one unable to guide or advance the education of public school and college students. *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), the influential report of the Reagan administration's Department of Education, cited schools as contributing to a myriad of economic, social, and military shortcomings. Studies by Diane Ravitch (1983), Chester Finn (1984), and Lynne Cheney (1988) maintained that the public school curriculum no longer emphasized valuable content. Controversy over the curriculum at Stanford and Harvard, for example, underscored the conflict between a more conservative view that sees "the Western tradition" as fundamental and of transcendent intellectual importance, and a more critical orientation that claims such a position denigrates and devalues less powerful cultures, thus maintaining patterns of cultural and social domination (P. Keller, 1982). During this decade the press corps offered reports of then Secretary of Education William Bennett's flights around the country. In those reports he continually bemoaned the sorry state of public educational institutions and maintained, like Bloom, Hirsch, Ravitch, Finn, Cheney, and others, that a more conservative approach to curriculum content portends not only a return to past mores but a more vigorous, strengthened, and promising future (Bennett, 1989). In short, during the 1980s, and into the 1990s, the political right has articulated a critique of current public school and college curricula and a vision for their transformation. It has been an articulation that relies on critiques of previous, purportedly liberal and progressive, educational practices while offering conservative alternatives. These conservative formulations are not newdespite occasional allegations to the contrary. They echo arguments and claims made throughout this century and earlier (Apple, 1985; Franklin, 1986; Kliebard, 1986).

More recent discussions have focused on the determination of some scholars within higher educator to foster what has been termed "political correctness" within the curriculum of the academy. There has developed

an antagonism between (1) those who argue that race, social class, and gender are important aspects of all claims to knowledge and thus must be taken into account in discussions of the "body of knowledge" that can and should be central to teaching and researchespecially in the humanities and social sciences, but in the natural sciences as well; and (2) those who see such a position as allowing politics to intrude on scholarly endeavors and "the pursuit of truth" through objective research. Among those who argue for the latter perspective is a relatively new group, the National Association of Scholars, established to resist what it sees as a growing tide of vocal critics of the traditional humanities view (Mooney, 1990).

Similarly, the Madison Center for Educational Affairs, founded by William Bennett and Allan Bloom, with Chester Finn as its president, has been created to "promote traditional values in the humanities" (Mooney, 1991, p. A16). A meeting at the Madison Center during the week of January 20, 1991, reflected something of the state of affairs in higher education:

> The conference reflected the polarization of the academy in recent years into opposing camps that often talk aboutbut seldom witheach other.... [Those advocating the centrality of race, gender, and class] have been labeled "politically correct" by critics who, like many of the participants in last week's conference, advocate the study of Western culture and an "objective" approach to scholarship. (Mooney, 1991, p. A15)

As in other decades, the rise of interest in cultural and social issues as a part of research, curricular, and teaching activities in colleges and universities has resulted in a conservative reaction that seeks to return to a "golden age" of reason, rationality, and objectivity that may be, in important respects, mythical and sentimental. Spokespersons for this reaction seek to discredit the growing chorus of voices urging greater sensitivity to nondominant groups in both research and teaching activities.

Such conflicts document an important, often overlooked point: It is simply a mistake to assume that the educational community ever speaks with one, uncontested voice. Even during the 1980s, when much of mainstream educational discourse was dominated by the forces of the new right, important alternative traditions and voices could be heard and in fact gained in strength and even academic respectability (one of the reasons for the creation of the Madison Center and similar efforts). In the same way, it is inaccurate to assume that cohesive, viable alternatives did not exist during earlier periods of school and curriculum reform. Therefore, while it is important to document dominant themes and movements in educational theory and practice, it is equally important that we keep in mind that those working to reform educationeven members of powerful groups with institutional backingdo not constitute a monolithic force. In researching

the movements of the 1980s, for example, the influence of the political right needs to be contrasted with those studies and visions that reflect a more progressive orientation. It is within such an orientation that we place our own work, while we seek to extend its grasp.

We must admit at the outset that, as in some earlier eras, more progressive responses to the educational and political trends of the 1980s and early 1990s have sometimes been lacking in clarity and incisiveness. Moreover, these responses have at times been excessively abstract, with insufficient attention paid to the current realities of education as well as to alternative visions with which to articulate revised educational practices. In what may be a mirroring of the larger political arena, leftist educational responses to the new right were not always able to formulate a curricular or broader educational agenda to counteract the conservative momentum of the last decade. Certainly there were many progressive analyses running counter to the conservative educational proposals that were dominant. Taken together, however, these progressive movements tended to speak as a cacophony of voices rather than as a coherent, albeit distinct, set of perspectives (see Beyer & Apple, 1988; Giroux & McLaren, 1989; Liston, 1988; Pinar, 1988; Ross, Cornett, & McCutcheon, 1992; Schubert, 1986; Sears & Marshall, 1990). The progressive tradition in educational scholarship, and perhaps especially in curriculum studies, is internally splintered and divided. For educational, intellectual, and political reasons, the articulation of a coherent progressive vision and practice is essential if we are to have substantive input into helping redirect educational experience.

Numerous and very distinct progressive voices have been heard within the curriculum field within the last 15 to 20 years. Differences are not only among people writing across these various traditions, but within them as well. And, of course, such differences are very real, reflecting the different frames of reference, styles, and social, material, and historical locations of the authors who provide them, as well as the traditions and communities in which they are embedded. It would be a mistake to presume that such divergent voices can easily reach some unanimity about what are the most important issues facing us currently and what are the most efficacious responses to them. Indeed we concur in general with the view that a search for consensus that disregards diversity and conflict is one of the important failings of the mainstream educational field and of the "new right." And yet we also recognize that, while the celebration of difference is important, it carries with it significant dangers. Since curriculum studies as a field, as well as the nature and direction of public school and university curricula, are thoroughly (though by no means exclusively) political matters, we are convinced that the differences that often divide progressive voices make improbable substantive changechange that almost by definition will require

collective action. If the differences that are represented by the range of progressive thought and action within the curriculum field continue to be divisive, our ability to enact any sort of transformative educational vision will be diminished. We believe that what is needed now is a coherent yet inclusive synthesis of a progressive tradition that challenges both the curricular status quo and the recent attempts at a conservative restoration, a synthesis that points to possible common goals, concerns, and commitments. Moreover, we believe the curriculum field provides perhaps the most promising domain in which to situate and further the larger educational debate that continues to develop regarding the proper means and ends of education. As we argue throughout this volume, and as we will in fact demonstrate, curriculum studies provide both the parameters within which the current debates in education can be clearly seen, and an important avenue for the redirection of educational practice.

Curriculum: The Field and its Central Issues

The reasons for highlighting the field of curriculum studies within current educational debates have already been alluded to and can be elaborated here. First, the curriculum is the centerpiece of educational activity. It includes the formal, overt knowledge that is central to the activities of teaching, as well as more tacit, subliminal messagestransmitted through the process of acting and interacting within a particular kind of institutionthat foster the inculcation of particular values, attitudes, and dispositions. In both its manifest and latent versions, the curriculum represents the essence of what education is for. It is often the focus of what teachers and professors see as their central preoccupation, what parents expect their offspring to master, and what community members and politicians focus on when, for example, debates take place regarding what students may or may not read, see, and listen to.

Second, struggles over the shape of the curriculum are often protracted and heated precisely because they relate directly to competing visions of "the good life," and, therefore, what sort of future we may have. James B. Macdonald (1975) made the following comments about the nature of curriculum theory and development, which illuminate this facet of the curriculum:

> I suspect that in many ways all curriculum design and development is political in nature; that is, it is an attempt to facilitate someone else's idea of the good life by creating social processes and structuring an environment for learning.

> Curriculum design is thus a form of "utopianism," a form of political and social philosophizing and theorizing. If we recognize this, it may help us sort out our own thinking and perhaps increase our ability to communicate with one another. (p. 293)

The centrality of the curriculum as a political and cultural force in contemporary social life can, in fact, be clearly seen in the debates between those advocating "political correctness" and those who seek to restore the conservative values of the traditional humanities.

Third, the curriculum field is intimately tied not only to other fields of educational inquiry (philosophy of education, policy studies, history of education, educational psychology, etc.) but to other disciplines normally considered separate from educational studies. The work of curriculum scholars frequently is concerned with issues in epistemology, political and moral philosophy, sociology of knowledge, and the physical and biological sciences. Whatever the boundaries that normally separate academic disciplines, they must, in the case of curriculum studies, be at least semipermeable. Those engaged in curriculum scholarship occupy a relatively open-ended, integrative domain that serves to differentiate it from other, more insulated areas within the university. This, together with the curriculum field's intimate connection to educational practice and to the larger social and cultural contexts in which it is embedded, serves to differentiate curriculum studies from other important domains within education.

Thus our decision to make the curriculum field the center of our analysis of the social and political positions reflected in current educational debates is hardly arbitrary. Yet even our points about the connectedness of curriculum issues and ideas with other educational domains, and with disciplines usually located outside the study of educational phenomena, have been, and to some extent still are, contentious within the field called curriculum studies. For the place of the curriculum field within both other scholarly domains and the larger social universe has been a central issue that has, in fact, actually helped to define the field. Rather than thinking about curriculum studies as defined by a set of characteristics or parameters about which there is substantial consensus, we would suggest that it is more fruitful and more responsive to the historical and contemporary dimensions of the field to think of it as constituted by a set of questions to which a variety of responses have been and continue to be made. It is just this feature of curriculum studies that makes it perhaps the best arena with which to analyze recent educational debates and proposals for practice.

These defining questions of curriculum studies highlight specific, context-dependent issues and more global concerns regarding curriculum matters. They harbor epistemological, ethical, and cultural frames of refer-

ence and issues. The central frameworks and questions we find most compelling include the following:

1. *What knowledge and forms of experience are most worthwhile?*

This is perhaps the central question of the field and one that has historically guided much curriculum development. Important issues here include, on the one hand, an array of complex epistemological questions and assumptions regarding, for instance, the nature of knowledge, knowing, and justification. On the other hand, ethical issues that always surround judgments of worth must be taken up, necessitating some axiological framework within which alternative ways of constructing and valuing knowledge can be considered and evaluated.

2. *What is the relationship between the knowledge embodied in the formal curricula and those who are involved in enacting it?*

It has often been assumed that "knowledge" can be thought of, at least analogically, as an entity or thing, or a set of propositions that can be stated and verified independently of those who are to acquire this knowledge. Yet there is a considerable body of both theoretical and empirical evidence that the histories and immediate cultural constructs of the people engaged with any curriculum unavoidably shape the experiences that result and, consequently, that knowledge is always *constructed*, rather than *discovered*. This emphasis on the interpersonal construction of knowledge undermines assumptions about the nature of knowledge as an entity that can be objectively transmitted through a disinterested curriculum form. The view that an individual's biography, capacities, life experiences, and psychological tendencies serve to interpret and give differential meaning to forms of knowledge (even those thought "most worthy") complicates what are already quite complex curricular issues. Such interpersonally diverse realities are of central importance in regard to both issues in curriculum studies and to thinking through what it means to teach and to become an educated woman or man.

3. *What types of educational and social relationships are required or desirable in order to facilitate curricular experiences?*

The enactment of any curriculum will affect the sort of human and social relationships that are possible or encouraged in the classroom. Thus, when generating a curriculum, we confront a number of normative options: To what extent should interactions among students be based on individual activities, to what extent on shared experience; in the case of the latter, should they be focused on competitive or cooperative activities? In addition, what ought the relationship be between teacher and student in formal institutions of education? Depending on our responses to the previous questions about the nature and worth of knowledge, the role of individual and social differences, and so on, we may well conceptualize pedagogical

possibilities quite differently. Thinking about knowledge as an objective entity, for instance, leads to a quite different set of social relations between teacher and student than if we see knowledge as emergent within an ongoing set of actions and modes of discourse, just as priorities regarding social relations affect participants' conception of knowledge and its value.

4. *How do larger social, political, and institutional contexts affect the experiences students have with the curriculum?*

In addition to considering individual variations that mediate curricular exchanges, how do the complex and interacting realities of race, social class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, cultural identity, and the like affect people's understandings and their curricular experiences? Conversely, how should such realities affect what is included or excluded in the curriculum? Different social and cultural groups have alternative forms of language, values, priorities, and structural locations within the wider society. These often significantly affect how people understand and make sense of the knowledge and values made accessible in any formal curriculum. The extent to which the cultural histories of students are taken into account in the design and implementation of the curriculum thus raises important ethical questions regarding how we treat students and how their futures are affected by the responsiveness of the curriculum.

5. *What are the implicit (and explicit) conceptions of democracy within the curriculum?*

Within modern democratic societies, education and a system of public schooling have come to be viewed as central means for ensuring the vitality and cohesiveness of a democratic way of life. The curriculum, constituted as either a set of proposals or as whatever practices currently exist in a school or university, is directly linked to the possibilities for democratic participation. The conception of knowledge contained within the curriculum, the relationships among students, the curriculum, and the teacher, and the role of the curriculum in examining persistent social issues are all elements that point to an implicit, if not explicit, conception of the connection between education and democracy. Moreover, there are a number of conceptions of democracy itself, some of which are, in fact, incompatible. This further complicates our ability to understand and critique forms of education and their contribution to a democratic way of life. Indeed part of the problem here is that "democracy" can become a kind of slogan, used to garner support for whatever practices we favor, without a sustained analysis of the concept itself and the kinds of curricular practices that can contribute to its enactment and attainment.

6. *What are the implicit (and explicit) visions of students' social, political, and economic futures, and how does the curriculum prepare students for these futures?*

Whatever else we may think education consists of or is good for, it is certainly related to students' futures, and so it cannot be divorced from a

consideration of what kind of world we envisage and help create with students. The range of possibilities in this regard may not be openly debated and discussed, for teachers often assume that the social status quo is the world for which they are preparing their students. Yet it is clear that this is not the only choice. As a normative enterprise, education must be concerned not only with the particular forms of knowledge, values, dispositions, and habits of heart and mind that are being transmitted, but with the social world that such individuals might create and inhabit as a result. For example, in some curriculum designs there is an attempt to sort and select what knowledge goes to what students, while in other curricula there is an attempt to treat students more equitably. Assumptions about students' possible futures play a key role in determining the type, quality, and distribution of knowledge. These assumptions in turn will affect what kinds of futures are possible and students' ability to participate in those futures.

The questions raised here have decidedly philosophical and normative emphases. Unfortunately, large segments of the curriculum field have frequently, especially in their more mainstream reiterations, paid insufficient attention to such issues as they have sought ameliorative responses to immediate problems or "crises." This has led to a kind of narrowness, even brittleness, that has not served the field well. We want to argue that an abiding concern with philosophical and normative questions provides an important route to effective and valuable curriculum deliberation, especially as we seek to alter educational practices. In this particular work we will argue that these questions provide the best means to examine and analyze current educational debates.

Any set of questions such as the one just elaborated must itself become part of the ongoing debate about what constitutes education and an appropriate curriculum; we make no pretense to completeness or veridicality, just as we recognize that the provision of any framework must be incomplete and somewhat tentative. Yet these questions do provide a starting point around which our own positions, assumptions, and interpretations may be clarified. Partly as a result of such clarification, and in facilitating a critique of our positions, we join and extend those debates that are so central to education and to our collective and individual futures.

An Outline

In this work we essentially contrast recent conservative and progressive educational proposals so as to justify and legitimate a more durable and sustaining reform movement. Our concern is to assess in a fair but pointed

manner the relative merits of recent proposals and to offer a route for a more thoroughgoing progressive orientation.

Curriculum in Conflict consists of seven chapters, addressing some crucial controversies in the curriculum of the public schools and universities. In Chapter 1, "The Historical Legacy," we present an overview of the field of curriculum studies. We examine the central epistemological assumptions and the overriding values that have governed past curriculum debates. This chapter serves as both a prelude and an introduction to our examination of the central issues that arise when one examines the conservative arguments that have recently gained momentum and the more progressive challenges to existing educational practices. We look at the historical background to the current situation, focusing on conservative and progressive traditions that have offered analyses of and recommendations for educational reform. In Chapter 2, "The New Right: Individualism, Free Markets, and Character," we examine the educational agenda of the new right and the philosophical and normative assumptions that undergird it. In particular, we examine the work of William Bennett, Chester Finn, and Diane Ravitch, focusing on both the general outlines of their educational agenda and their views of moral and multicultural education. We also explore classical liberal conceptions of the individual, market economies, moral deliberation, and the state that inform and guide the new right's educational proclamations. In Chapter 3, "Modern Liberalism and the Welfare State," we outline more progressive educational agendas, particularly those related to revised understandings of democracy and social justice, and their relationship to an altered form of (modern) liberal consciousness. We include an analysis of various movements and ideas designed to soften the effects of unrestrained capitalism, particularly those undergirding the formation of the modern welfare state. In Chapter 4, "Dominating Dynamics: Radical Critiques of Class, Gender, and Race," we focus on educational critiques motivated by neo-Marxist, feminist, and racial/ethnic scholarship. We highlight both the shared and the distinctive features of these radical frameworks. We maintain that central to the radical analysis is an examination of structures of domination in schools and the society at large. In Chapter 5, "Post-modernism," we examine one of the more recent developments in social and educational theorypostmodern analyses of school and society. We highlight the central tenets of postmodern analyses and underscore what are for us particularly difficult paradoxes. We maintain that postmodern critiques are guided by a suspicion of the "metanarratives" of both liberal and radical thought, a criticism of any sort of epistemological realism, and a concern for the other. In Chapter 6, "Our Social and Democratic Vision: Toward a New Progressivism," we incorporate the concerns that have led to an embrace of new right proposals on the part of many, while suggest-

ing alternative ways to conceptualize the nature of freedom, character, and community. Going beyond the ideas of modern liberalism, we also explore alternative ways to think about work in the United States, particularly ways in which it may be made more meaningful and democratically organized. These alternatives have important implications for educational policy and practice, which we explore in Chapter 7, "One Progressive Agenda." In this final chapter we suggest strategies for the progressive renewal of schools and universities, focusing again on curriculum debates and issues.

Any response to the social and educational difficulties that continue to face Americans will entail concerted, conjoint action across differences. Yet this need for communal action cannot be allowed to hide the different voices that make up any progressive orientation. As a result, we do not end on a note of synthetic resolution to all the issues and concerns raised by the critical scholarship with which we are affiliated. We do offer in this volume a way to build a cultural solidarity within the progressive community of scholars, researchers, and teachers that we hope may lead to effective action.