

## **Curriculum, Marginalization, and the Professoriate**

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*The author exposes the subtext on which education and particularly curriculum making is based by focusing on the notion that the professoriate has been marginalized within curriculum planning by an educational hegemony that utilizes the sorting and classification mechanisms present in education to co-opt the development of educational plans.*

To many, the neat curriculum document that is presented to students, parents, and educational stakeholders represents the product of a long and thoughtful process that unites the combined wisdom of professors and professional educators to plan courses of study with one eye focused on personal development and the other looking toward the needs of society, education's primary stakeholder. Enveloped within this rather prosaic view of curriculum is the common, but naïve notion that education occurs in a political vacuum that harbors no unarticulated or hidden agendas and which is not subject to external pressures that shape educational goals for specific non-educational reasons. In essence, this view perceives curriculum development as an open process that emanates from frank conversation about the philosophy of education, the implications of what it means to be educated, and public needs. In spite of the dominant conceptualization of curriculum development as a cooperative and shared venture, the process of determining the curriculum at all levels of education is far from transparent and even further from apolitical. Rather, the procedure that leads to the acceptance and eventual publication of a clean and concise document is subject to hostile actions, ill-intentions, and power plays that ultimately result in a document with which few are happy and which promotes the agenda of restricting the curriculum rather than promoting the liberating promise invoked in educational rhetoric. In this paper, I will attempt to expose the subtext on which education and particularly curriculum making is based. Namely, I will explore the notion that the professoriate has been marginalized within curriculum planning by an educational hegemony that utilizes the sorting and classification mechanisms present in education to co-opt and restrict the development of educational plans and pathways.

Although the concept of a hidden, guiding hand within curriculum has been exposed and explored, discussions have centered on how the hidden curriculum asserts social control by *schooling*<sup>1</sup> students into accepting their pre-destined educational achievements (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), coerces students into accepting blame for their academic shortcomings (White, 2007), and guides children into appropriate professional and vocational career paths based on social class and the educational hegemony's notion of national needs (Apple & King, 1983; Giroux & Penna, 1983; & Kliebard, 1999). Little has been said, however, of the educational hegemony, or metanarrative, that guides these practices. As Michael Apple (1996) reminds us, hegemonies are co-constructed entities whose ability to guide and control society is not based on coercion, but rather on consent from the oppressed. By creating "an ideological umbrella under which different groups who usually might not totally agree with each other can stand" (Apple, 1996, p. 15), hegemonies succeed in forging consensus where more overtly coercive forms of repression fail. In the case of the educational hegemony, the system is constructed of neo-conservatives, neo-liberals, cultural elites, and a public fearful of loss of place in an ever-changing world order that are bound in an uneasy, yet powerful alliance. To these groups, whether left or right of center, the primary culprit of the decline of American values, American business, and the American way of life is an educational system that fails miserably to protect the American dream by promoting a vision of education that is beset by moral relativism and cultural ambiguity. The American educational hegemony brings to bear its considerable structural and rhetorical power to achieve its goal of recreating education for national resurrection within economic, national security, and cultural spheres.

The foundations of this educational hegemony were laid more than one hundred years ago with the arrival of Horace Mann's centralized and compulsory education. While access to education increased, the scientific management of schools and students produced individuals whose behavior was malleable and predictable. These early reforms accelerated in the decades following the American Civil War and turned educational practice from the age of the classics to the time of technology and industry. As the nation moved inexorably away from the Jeffersonian model of small farms and gentlemanly ways and toward a nation whose self-conceptualization is based on econometric measurements, the country's educational policy was co-opted in the

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, "schooling" refers to the idea that cultural institutions instill certain beliefs in individuals and create a

service of industry. Hebert Kliebard (1999) suggested early mass education, especially at the secondary level, was given the role of producing competent workers capable of laboring in the rapidly developing industrial sector. Indeed, as the nation's factories clamored for a larger and better trained workforce, the apprenticeship system that had for centuries supplied a sufficient number of skilled workers could no longer keep pace with industrial needs (Kliebard, 1999). While the inefficiencies of the apprenticeship system proved its demise, the generalized education system that replaced it laid the groundwork for an educational system based on factory and social efficiency models. Within this evolving conceptualization of education, the developing, or proto-educational hegemony, endeavored to create an educational system that subverted individual democratic values to the will and needs of a centralized industrial society. Perhaps equally important, this new educational system taught Americans to abandon their belief in outdated religious institutions in favor of faith in secular schools and the promise of industry, science, and national mission (Gatto, 2005). This national and educational conceptualization was confirmed in 1925, when Calvin Coolidge, speaking to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, expressed his now famous mantra, "After all, the chief business of the American people is business," adding that we, as a nation, are "profoundly concerned with producing, buying, selling, and investing and prospering in the world."

This national purpose and educational conceptualization continued unabated and unquestioned through economic depression, world wars, red scares of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and conflict on the Korean peninsula. It was not until the 1960s that social and educational movements began to question the foundations on which the educational hegemony had, for so long, rested comfortably. The reconceptualist movement in curriculum theory sought to explore the source of curriculum rather than continue the Tylerian debate over the construction of curricula (Pinar, 1974). Attempts to explain curriculum brought about discussions that formed links between learning and social justice at education's intersection with race, gender, and sexuality. While the reconceptualist movement provided a foundation on which we understand the purpose of education, it failed to move education and curriculum development from its narrow procedural focus to a promising process that promotes individual growth and transformation. Equally important, social movements associated with the 1960s failed to root out entrenched stances toward American culture, the meaning of democracy, and what counts as good education. Failures to articulate a new vision of learning for change, true democratic

values, and acceptance of others led to an increasingly narrowly defined national curriculum that strangled the development of intellect and critical thinking while promoting vocationalized learning that offers temporary job security and a renewal of a national mission to undo declines in prestige, moral values, and economic domination.

In the midst of obvious challenges to the culture of education in the 1960s, traditional roles were reinforced rather than overturned. In a paradoxical twist, challenges, whether great or small, to the existing order often go unfulfilled due to the existence of a hegemonical structure that ensnares the oppressed classes into co-constructed social beliefs that while seductive, serve to entrench existing inequalities. In essence, pivotal moments, including events such as the launch of Sputnik or declining test scores, are turned into moments of opportunity for the oppressors rather than the oppressed and lead to the tightening of social control at what might be labeled fault lines in history; pivotal moments when particular parties become aware of potential within chaos. Emile Durkheim, for one, believed that the loss of a centralized system of beliefs, or what he termed the *ancien regime*, left society in an untethered position that threatened to dissolve societal bonds and which also created a vacuum into which those most prepared to take advantage of the turmoil could step. There is little doubt that in American history, the 1960s represented a moment of cultural and social chaos that had both immediate and long-term consequences. Indeed, cultural clashes between traditional society and proponents of social justice portended continued cultural unease throughout the remainder of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and ripped holes in the fabric of the social compact through which groups who wished to claim, or reclaim, places of authority within society could easily pass. These societal fissures offered the emerging educational hegemony the opportunity to promise a retreat to tradition that seduced the public into accepting a constricted meaning of education that appeared to reinforce the cultural pride once present in the nation; a curriculum that promised, in essence, a national resurrection from the ashes of the post-modern malaise.

The educational hegemony's authority was assured in the later stages of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by social/cultural chaos and a series of national traumas, including Vietnam, Watergate, and various foreign policy and domestic disasters that permeated the late 1960s and 1970s. Questions of quality and purpose dominated discussions of education in America as educational results appeared to decline and other nations seemed to catch up to and eventually surpass the United States in terms of test scores, economic status, and political importance. With this

perceived collapse in educational standards as the backdrop, questions of financial and programmatic accountability began to seep into social, political, and educational discourse. When Ronald Reagan came to the presidency, he brought with him a quest for accountability that placed increasing financial pressure on states for education and other social programs. Concomitant with these fiscal changes, the Reagan administration's now famous report of the state of education, *A Nation at Risk*, suggested that the country was under an internal attack that amounted to nothing short of national suicide. As questions of educational accountability began to echo through the halls of government and into the public's consciousness, the apocalyptic nature of government reports reinforced perceptions of a failing system and convinced the public that education for national resurrection was required to stem the tide of mediocrity. The tsunami of national fear and perceptions of educational failure enabled the educational hegemony to seize control of the field by *schooling* the public into accepting and indeed advocating for, a restriction of the curriculum to those areas, *i.e.*, math and science, that promote neo-conservative notions of success. With these changes also came new means of conceptualizing education and the conversations that results in the determination of curriculum. Over time, and as the curriculum became increasingly restricted, the design and development of curriculum became marked by confrontation in which clear winners and losers are seen. In the new model of curriculum development for national resurrection, the locus of curricular control shifted from the local to the national. This seismic alteration in the educational landscape has marginalized practicing professionals, the professoriate, who are no longer asked to provide insight into the dailiness or purpose of educational practices and has reduced the public to the role of puppets who are deftly manipulated by a shadow educational group who rhetoric seems to promise a return to the education and cultural foundations that once assured access to the "good life."

Curriculum has become, in essence, the primary tool in restricting the meaning of learning and attempts to reclaim economic dominance and regain an imperialistic footing. The National Resurrection Curriculum Development process (see Figure 1) ostracizes the professoriate from curricular conversations and is based on a Top Down model of curriculum development that excludes professional educators while embracing the three pillars of national political, economic, and military power. All curriculum decisions are filtered through an educational hegemony, consisting of neo-liberals, neo-conservatives, and a public afraid of continued loss (Apple, 1996) that co-opts education for its own purposes, including ensuring its

own survival via restricting education to a highly specialized and vocational rationale that limits the ability to think beyond the narrowly defined boundaries of one's field of study. The educational hegemony uses the public's perception of educational failure, artfully articulated in documents such as "A Nation at Risk" and the "Report on the Commission on the Future of Higher Education" to fuel conversations about the pressing need for national standards and national tests to ensure that educational success and national resurrection are achieved. This closed system of curriculum development not only ensures that the educational hegemony can impose its will on education but also creates a system that is self-regulating. That is to say that the link between standards espoused by the educational hegemony and high stakes testing ensures that prescribed standards are met and provides the opportunity to marginalize students who fail to achieve pre-determined passing results. More insidiously, however, this system ensures disenfranchised portions of society fail to overcome the significant obstacles placed in their paths while also engaging in self-constructed criticism of their abilities that tends to place blame not on the system, but rather on their own perceived shortcomings (White, 2007; Apple, 1996).

In this working model, questions of curricular content, goals, methods, and evaluation are subsumed under an all-encompassing higher level of national goals. All questions of curricular content, evaluation, and pedagogy are pre-determined and the great curricular debate is left to a weakened professoriate that has little or no input into the process. This marginalized debate occurs in the pages of increasingly obscure and narrowly defined journals and rarely enters into the public consciousness. More importantly, these debates seldom make their way into the inner sanctum of the educational hegemony where curriculum decisions are made. The National Resurrection Curriculum encourages a separation of the search for truth and meaning in life and the vocational skills needed to perform technical jobs in the global economy. The allure of the vocational training can be found in its promise to augment standards of living by the two-stage process of increasing productivity, thereby lowering costs, and increasing wages. Richard Wolff (1971) suggests that American capitalism has been particularly successful in creating a system that efficiently achieved these objectives while simultaneously quieting potential discordant voices. Continuing on this trajectory, Wolff (1971) also suggests that hidden within the bowels of this model, personal freedoms and meaning have been lost in favor of rampant consumerism that has a sensory appeal while also ensuring continued oppression

The National Resurrection Curriculum encourages a restriction of education by suggesting that the values that made the nation great have been lost in the swamp land of multiculturalism and moral relativity. In allowing the curricular debate to be controlled by an educational hegemony, the meaning of education can be restricted to structures that favor the political, economic, and military agenda of the hegemony. These agenda are highly seductive to a public that has lost ground in almost all indicators of national and personal success. Indeed, the rhetoric and underlying values foster arguments for standards in an era where the public perceives that standards are nonchalantly tossed aside in favor of creating individuals who are comfortable with themselves and eager to engage in interpersonal and intrapersonal dialog. To many, contemporary students lack the killer instincts and the moral certitude that made the nation great. Standards-based instruction acts as an antidote to a failing system and underscores the necessity for reconnecting with past practices and past educational glories by promoting these national characteristics and by offering the job-related skills that provide for moderate increases in personal wages and significant increases in the nation's ability to battle its economic, political, and military rivals.

Finally, these standards are reinforced by high stakes testing that provides prestige and financial compensation to successful schools while simultaneously *schooling* failing schools and students into accepting their plight without complaint. Proponents of testing suggest that continual assessment of progress and knowledge allows educators and society to guard against the tsunami of mediocrity that undermines "the nations competitive edge and negatively impacts the American economy (Wasley, Donmoyer, & Maxwell, 1995, p. 51). In essence, high stakes testing is purported to be the single most effective mechanism for evaluating the effectiveness of teaching methods and ensuring that the skills needed to reclaim American dominance are taught. Of greater concern, however, is the unarticulated purpose of testing as the most powerful means to sort "students along socio-economic and linguistic divides and also the deleterious 'backwash' effect of blaming teachers and students themselves for substandard performance" (Ickes-Dunbar, 2005, p. 3). In fact, testing within education becomes the primary means to classify and sort students into an educational system that hinders rather than facilitates the establishment of schools that promote democracy, respectful disagreement, and the assumption of positive intent and capacity. The sorting and classification to which Bourdieu and Passerson (1977) refer, becomes an educational triage ensuring that students are socially classified and placed into

programs that are ostensibly democratic but which promote the covert agenda of producing easily governed citizens.

The three intertwined loci of curriculum development that we have discussed (the educational hegemony, national standards, and high-stakes testing) create a self-contained and self-perpetuating system that provides, through an ontological tautology, the rationale for the system as well as the mechanisms to ensure that the system is not challenged. In essence, the system schools society into accepting, without questions, the power of the curriculum process to determine reliable and meaningful goals while simultaneously governing access, success, and failure within the system.

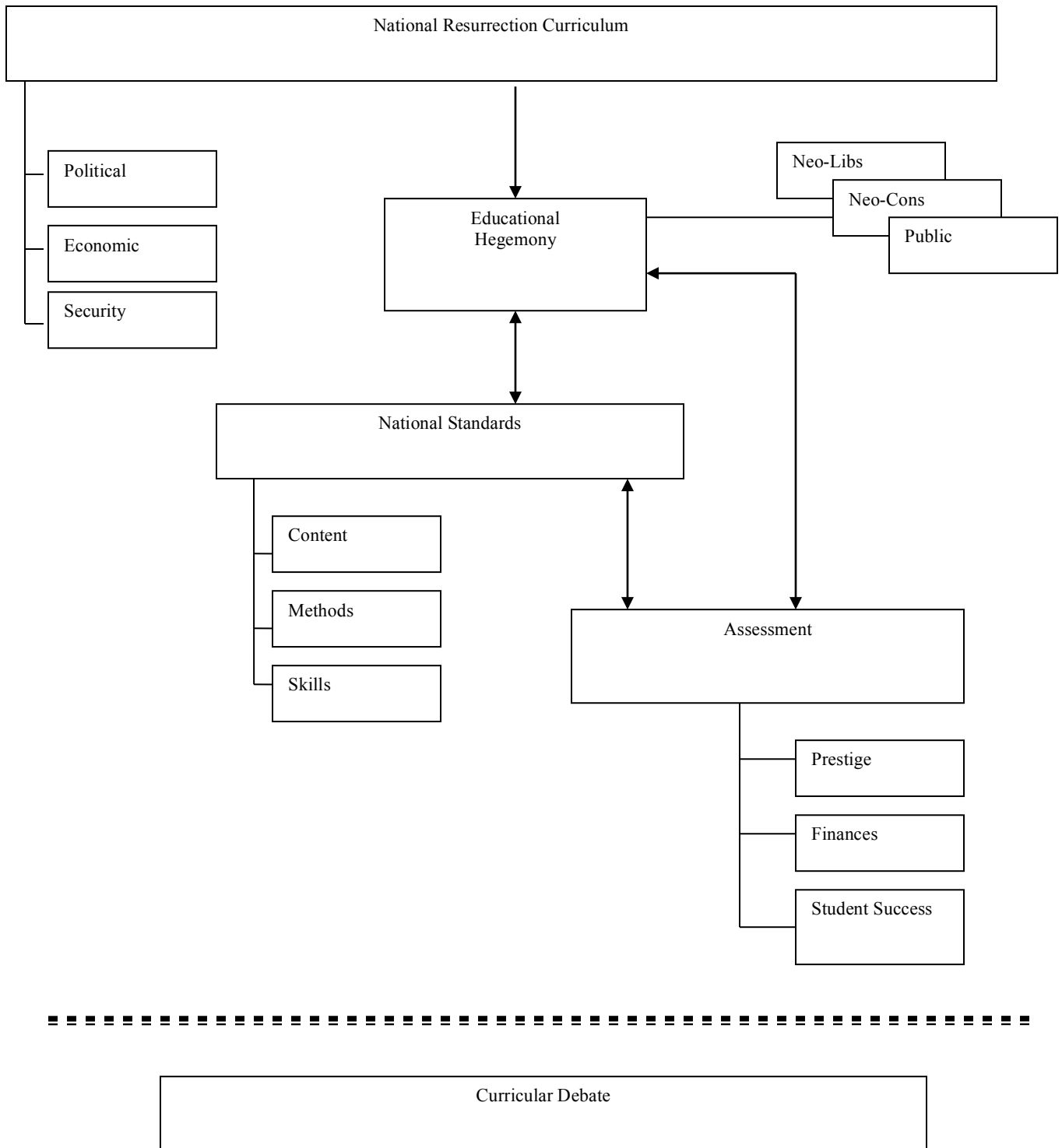
It is clear that the conceptualization of the curriculum based on national resurrection has ostracized curricular experts from conversations over policy, goals, and purpose. Instead of working from within the educational debate, professors and teachers are left to argue the consequences of changes in education in the pages of rarely read journals and professional proceedings. All this ensures a vocationalized educational system that increases the standard of living while simultaneously dulling the intellectual senses. Antonio Gramsci (1971) and John Dewey (1959) both addressed the demeaning nature of vocational education that seeks first and foremost to create skilled factory workers who lack the intellectual skills to be contributing members of society. In statements that not only spoke to problems of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century but also to modern education, Gramsci (1971) noted that vocational education was a bane to the poorer classes and created an industrial education that limited the capacity to think critically and engage in truly democratic activities. In Gramsci's (1971) thoughts, vocational education ensured that intelligence and growing awareness of social injustices were undermined by the proliferation of vocational programs that became the loci for mechanical instruction and antidemocratic traditions. For his part, John Dewey (1959) provided a stunningly accurate view of the future (our present) when, reflecting upon the impact of vocational education and the restriction of the curriculum to manual labor and instrumental schooling, he noted that education can be an effective "instrument of perpetuating unchanged the existing order of society instead of operating as a means of its transformation" (p. 369). Ultimately, the use of highly vocationalized curricula that focus exclusively on job training conspires to create individuals who are effective at certain mundane mechanical tasks but who also have become easily governable due to their inability to think critically or reflectively across boundaries and



synthesize information that would allow them to clearly see the adverse effects of contemporary education.

We return, at last, to the central question of this paper: Whose curriculum is it and where is the professoriate's place in the construction of curriculum and educational experiences? I feel assured that we can safely answer that the curriculum of secondary, and to an increasing extent higher education, has been birthed through the efforts of an educational hegemony that is made up of neo-conservatives, neo-liberals, and a large cross-section of individuals who are afraid for their future or who simply wish to consolidate the gains of their pasts. This vision of curriculum development emasculates teachers and professors; in fact, it renders powerless all educators who desire change and a curriculum that creates opportunities for real growth and possible emancipation. It also creates mere educational technocrats of professional teachers by obligating them to be transmitters of officially approved knowledge into the less than eagerly awaiting minds of children and young adults. And, perhaps more devastating than any of these other problems, it creates a situation in which children's failures become their own fault. The National Resurrection Curriculum, in essence, silences potential and serves as a legitimating tool for continued control of knowledge. As we ponder not only the present, but the future of education, questions about implications and suggestions for action always come to mind. As educators, we hope to contribute to the creation of communities, local, national, and worldwide, that value just, tolerant, and equitable treatment of people. Yet, to create these communities, we must engage in a fundamental self-evaluation of what we believe a community should be and how we might ensure that our investment in education yields long-term results for all and not simply the few who belong to, or aspire to membership in the educational hegemony. John Dewey (1959) once noted that the "community's duty to education is ... its paramount moral duty" and further suggested that "education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform" (p. 31) I wonder whether we, in education, have the moral strength to recover the curriculum or whether we will ultimately succumb to the pressures and become mere automatons, entrusted with the duty of creating efficient technocrats who numbly perform essential duties while losing their souls and minds and whether we, as educational professionals, will eventually be condemned to the same fate.

**Figure 1. Working Model for National Resurrection Curriculum Building**



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