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# A Critical Humanist Curriculum

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### **Abstract**

*This essay is a critical humanist discussion of curriculum; a departure from the technicist view of education [education meant to support a global capitalist economy] and an analysis of curriculum considering critical humanism, political economy and critical race theory among other modes of critical analysis and inquiry. Our discussion supports a revolutionary curriculum: the turn from a static coercive system of domination where the everyday lives of students are controlled to a dynamic liberatory education where education supports a student's imaginary (Pinar), creativity and their everyday practice of freedom (Freire, Greene, hooks).*

**Keywords:** *Humanism, critical theory, critical education, education for social justice.*

### **Beginning**

In the summer of 2010, Kevin and I were discussing our experiences in graduate education, our understandings of what Professors called the critical curriculum: education for social justice, multicultural education, critical education and so on. A result of our personal disposition we bought into the transformative nature of education, a mixture of what we understood from the lectures we attended at University and our practical experiences teaching in public schools.

Throughout our conversation we discussed our learnt experiences, we recalled beginning our practice equipped with a developing epistemology, the intersection of curriculum and pedagogy, what is taught and how it is taught in schools, and our ontological vision, the possibility of further transforming the nature of education by working with our students to support their particular educational needs as they encounter a limited US curriculum in post No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top classrooms. At first, our discussions were limited to the highly criticized

US system, but we considered how educational outcomes were being perceived and enacted worldwide. Why, for example, is the lauded Finnish system, experiencing such success in the eyes of the academic community? Is it a product of a multilingual classroom culture, local autonomy, equitable allocation of resources, lack of standardized tests, more inclusive learning communities, (Darling-Hammond, 2010) or environments where students who are valued as human beings in their exploration of their being in the world? Is curriculum in these countries a departure from or a cementing of global capitalist social relations of production? As our discussion developed we further considered some of the encounters we experienced with colleagues and administrators as we attempted to transform the curriculum in our own context, subsequently the idea for this paper was born: what might be possible for the curriculum if we apply a critical view of the field, the intersection of a critical humanist ontology and a transformative epistemology to the curriculum encountered in public schools? How might we support the lives of our students if we apply principles of a critical emancipatory education to the standards based and high stakes assessment methods under which curriculum is currently defined?

### **No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top and School Deform**

The purpose of this paper then is to examine shortcomings identified (or not) given the current U.S. curricular tradition, a reflection of the expansion of empire around the world, and offer a departure from the standards or outcomes based high stakes testing in what we understand to be essentialist and reductionist notions of the formation of a school curriculum and present an alternative conception of what curriculum is and how it becomes inexorably connected to student life. We use the United States public education structure as the basis for our critique. The analysis, however, extends to much of the world's educational community. "Our professional obligation," as Pinar claims, "is the reconstruction of the public sphere in education" (Pinar, 2004, p. 21).

In teacher education, educators are baptized into a restrictive framework, reducing personal ontology to mechanized understandings: what schooling is for, who may access an education, and the scope or meaning of a public education.

In the US teachers are beginning to see beyond the specter of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), engaging the potential for transformative understandings of curriculum including ten years of failed, recycled practices [language, literacy and numeracy programs and high stakes testing] competencies, thematic teaching, skills based curricula, provide the space for adoption of a more dynamic curricular policy. Educators are aware, however that these policies are not a simple transfer of resources or a recreation of old concepts. Curriculum policies and impressions of them are shaped by what the world and its citizenry may consider equilibrium between Neo-liberal and liberal educational principles, we suggest considering the historical *modus operandi*. A system of public class based education in consideration of society's cyclical trends which, traditionally, have funneled a majority of students toward labor power for the neoliberal global capitalist economy via a curriculum of socially acquired capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1990), that is, dis-cluding a liberal or critical and democratic curriculum. Because capitalism requires inequitable practices for the exploitation of the masses, the conditions for commodification are created and permeate the classroom curriculum (Hill, 2012). We call for nothing less than a curriculum that, "rejects the "business minded" school reform", as well as its "miseducation of the...public" (Pinar, 2004, p. 16).

In the practice of curriculum we begin with Pinar's (2011) notion that "complex conversations" are useful analyses for the expression of personal development, critical reflection, in and outside of academic spaces and in interactions with others, as they become "threaded through academic knowledge, an ongoing project of self-understanding in which one becomes mobilized for engagement in the world" (Pinar, p. 47). Educators practicing in a system of commodification are slaved to history; our creativity has been purposefully limited, facilitating the capitalist based curriculum, the reproduction of which is a dangerously narrow view of education and public life.

NCLB policymakers implement education reform with the idea that setting high standards with measurable goals will increase individual educational outcomes. Standardization of assessment and practice

under NCLB has a direct and harmful impact on the nature of education around the world. Complex and meaningful conversations have been removed from the classroom; critical instruction/analysis and the development of a personal consciousness have been trivialized. “In an NCLB-driven world, the list of what’s not measured far exceeds any list of what is measured” “Any system that hinges the evaluation of an entire school on one test score average from one group of students at one grade level cannot hope to accurately assess that school” (Guilfoyle, 2006, p. 13). Student and teacher personal ontology and relevancy, becomes inconsequential and interchangeable with bureaucratic governmental standards for curriculum; students are discouraged from thinking critically with regard to outcomes, instead they are drilled with current en vogue epistemologies. Students of special populations are further disenfranchised by requiring they too achieve categorically successful test scores, requiring schools find creative ways to pass tests, including the elimination of students by expelling them from school or providing days off on testing days, further strengthening the school to prison pipeline. According to Texas Appleseed (Fitzgerald, 2007), “Zero tolerance policies are removing thousands of juveniles from the classroom and sending them to in-school and out-of-school suspension.” The zero tolerance policy allows teachers with not traditional populations to simply remove students whose cultural norms or educational needs do not match the idea of the prevailing educational structure. As a result, in Texas, “More than one third of ...public school students were dropped out in 2005-06, Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs have five times the dropout rate of mainstream schools, one in three juveniles sent to the Texas Youth Commission are school dropouts and more than 80 percent of Texas prison inmates are dropouts.” This school to prison pipeline creates what Wacquant (2001) calls a “hyper-ghetto” “prison society” created for the impoverished as part of their curriculum-developed and reinforced by the educational structures of the state apparatus.

Policy adjustments to NCLB like Race to the Top have been similarly criticized because of limited performance measures. Civil rights organizations critique these initiatives, “Such an approach reinstates the antiquated and highly politicized frame for distributing federal support to

states that civil rights organizations fought to remove in 1965” (McNeil, 2010). Arbitrary and capricious federal scoring measures decide who will receive funding, further tying education to government and the allocation of capital.

Common Core has also been criticized for its inability to change education as it is currently practiced. It purportedly considers the dearth of critical thinking within a mindless testing legacy left by previous one-size fits all curricula. Other critics argue funding practices require school districts to transfer funds away from art and music programs further narrowing educational aims to meet the demand for a neoliberal workforce. US public education as is seen in other world contexts, consider: China, Mexico, England, Australia have been limited to preapproved curricular frameworks. As recent developments indicate, brought to light given the Edward Snowden debacle, the government will continue collecting our personal data for use in the perpetuation of these frameworks.

## **The Sound of a Different Drummer**

There are multiple definitions of curriculum whether its practice is didactic or inquiry based. As listed in Oliva (1997), curriculum:

Is everything that goes on within the school, including extra-class activities, guidance, and interpersonal relationships  
Everything that is planned by school personnel  
A series of experiences undergone by learners in a school  
That which an individual learner experiences as a result of schooling (p 4)

We acknowledge the results of education exist outside of school and the effects of education are an active agent on social order (Durkheim, 1897/1951). Curriculum then is the primary weapon by which education affects the selfsame social order. Teachers mould student worldviews (intended or otherwise) by what is presented through their conscious and unconscious actions in a typical classroom day. This framing of a student’s life experience illustrates the narrow parameters by which teachers believe students are able to live, ultimately supporting or disassembling hopes, dreams and aspirations. Often discussed but

rarely considered by educators, does K-12 schooling prepare students for college, for democratic public life or does it subtly create the conditions for an oligarchic democratic republic? According to Dewey and Durkheim, education is dynamic, it includes: classroom experience, reflective thinking, further interaction with the curriculum and rethinking based on what is encountered. Curriculum is not only “any experience students have under the guidance of teachers”, (Caswell & Campbell, 1935) but it is the sum of formative student experience. This extends to the society in which the student experiences the curriculum; this includes any actors in the student’s life- from the teacher who introduces the student to the traditional curriculum, the janitor who throws a football with a student during lunch break, and the homeless person who asks for change as students make their way home from school. Thus, a student’s curriculum is their life and life is a student’s curriculum. Wilson, (1990) describes this phenomenon as:

Anything and everything that teaches a lesson, planned or otherwise. Humans are born learning, thus the learned curriculum actually encompasses a combination of all of the below -- the hidden, null, written, political and societal etc. Since students learn all the time through exposure and modeled behaviors, this means that they learn important social and emotional lessons from everyone who inhabits a school -- from the janitorial staff, the secretary, the cafeteria workers, their peers, as well as from the deportment, conduct and attitudes expressed and modeled by their teachers. Many educators are unaware of the strong lessons imparted to youth by these everyday contacts. (Wilson, 1990, pg.1)

A major part of the planned curriculum is also found in the voided spaces in which students are not being acted upon, the “null spaces” (Eisner, 1994), or what happens between what is planned and what is experienced, that affects the people students will become. Null space and the educational experiences beyond classroom teaching become didactic curriculum, spaces influencing students to accept a curriculum of domination. Students will forget much of what they memorized in a classroom, they will internalize the ideas and recreate the conditions for their subjugation as they passively accept the ways they have been positioned. Those considered competent in society are able to problem solve, but only within the narrow fields of cultural production (Bourdieu,

1990) as they take their place within the capitalist hierarchy. The policeman, service worker or call center operator act as both the servant and enforcer of the ideologies learnt in schools.

Curriculum then must act as an epistemological bridge between students and teachers for students to generate a transformative ontology: this is the machine of production meeting the trans-historical capacity or nature of human beings. Put another way, how does one become an actor and agent while living in the system that is neoliberal global capitalist domination? The student as active agent in her or his own education is missing in the traditional and didactic definitions of curriculum. Passive students and the lessons offered are not the only measure of curriculum. The way students perceive and engage curricula are as important as the stimulus offered the student. What is most important is how they (in turn) affect the world.

Every student has had a lifelong curriculum, developed consciously or unconsciously by family, society and other worldly interactions. The child left to society with little care or guidance has the scars of attempting to survive within a value system of commodification. It ensures students will consider her (his) life unimportant providing further complications for schooling and curricular practice in the traditional classroom. Students are not stupid. Their personal ontology is marked by experiences at odds socially and culturally from that of their teachers, it leaves them unimpressed with algebra or knowledges as defined by what is considered valuable by ancient white protestant men. The curriculum of everyday life for many school-aged children in the US, Canada, England, Australia, as well as other parts of the world has often, perhaps unintentionally, been the worst human nature has to offer. The subsequent reaction is for students to insulate themselves from the effects of biased and irrelevant curricula.

Who then is driving the curricular bus? As Pinar (2004) describes, “By linking the curriculum to student performance on standardized examinations, politicians have, in effect taken control of what is to be taught. Examination-driven curricula demote teachers from scholars and intellectuals to technicians in service of the state. The cultivation of self-



reflexive, interdisciplinary erudition and intellectuality disappears. Rationalized as “accountability”, political socialization replaces education” (p. 2-3). The above argument might ring true; however, we will further argue the conditions also exist for the transformation of domination and enculturation via the curriculum. Even in a system where curriculum has been politically hijacked, educators can create the conditions for true democratic discourse in the classroom.

## **Humanists and Humanism in Education**

The socio-historical considerations, critiquing society, of critical humanism lie in both its ties and break from humanism. This becomes a challenging conversation considering the diverse and monumental nature of humanist ontologies. Kurtz (1973) in *The Humanist Alternative* considers the advancements and understandings, which have led us to scientific and analytical modernity, we are now able to see ourselves as free from a predetermined fate- meaning we must both look within ourselves for agency and realize we are already (or have no possibility) for salvation beyond ourselves. These realizations lead to different interpretations of what it means to be humanist in different disciplines as well and the various movements under its banner. Critical humanism then, is not one version of humanism representing the whole, though most incarnations attend to human suffering and unity as paramount to their cause. We acknowledge this as but contend that human nature itself, is transhumanist, not fully biologically yet prepared to create the conditions for a humanist utopia. This does not mean humanity is incapable of the kindness and agency that humanists profess, only that we must consider the totality of the human condition. Humanity is in this way the source of our greatest action for both good and evil. The human function is shaped for purposes with and without consciousness. Our agency in matters of good and evil (as well as diversity in ethical consensus) brought us, Arturo and Kevin, to critical humanism as a framework in which individuals are able to see themselves and their fellow man in a more dynamic consideration of the suffering and exploitation humanism hopes to overcome.

Humanism then attempts to offer human agency and rationality as a solution to human suffering but fails to fully consider the limiting natures

of social systems and how human reason is dependent on framed experience and existence. An appropriate but incomplete picture, we reject the humanist claims that humans are the center of the world and fully responsible for their actions as they suggest that humans have experienced life equally and with little regard to the larger world. Furthermore, humanism contains problematic conceptions including but not limited to a masculine design (Belsey, 2002) and reliance on the hyper rational mind as singularly transcendent. When individuals are tired, hungry and treated as sub-human, how can human agency be possible? Individuals rationalize the way the world has treated them and the bread they steal to alleviate suffering. How can humanistic rationality reach beyond the system of oppression, which has formed human beings? It can only be realized when people have “confidence in their own natural powers and abilities and the courage to use them” (Kurtz, 1973, p. 7) and the conditions for which must first be created by fully flourishing and emancipated humans beings.

Furthermore Adorno (2005) considered cultural organization, as the division, which prevents people from experiencing themselves, suggesting the intellectual liberty of humanity, is paramount to its authentically “being”. It is not enough however to provide humanistic considerations as a therapeutic strategy for living. We consider McNeil’s (2010) critical post-human premise accepting that humans, can no longer rely on instrumentalism (controlling the natural world as we have), but must reject the idea we are not unique creatures. Though we share many traits with other earthly species, humans are exceptional for their ability to reason and then act on that reason. Furthermore critical humanists have considered that humanity has categorized itself and through it has the natural impulse to exploit and divide. It is the uncritical and colonial notions of humanism that must be reconciled in a critical humanism. When “human” is tightly defined and characterized, problematic generalizations occur and when defined as too loosely, “everything from totalitarianism to raking gravel” (Halliwell & Mousley, 2003, p. 2) becomes understood as an expression of human nature. As Fanon (2004) points out from a critical race/postcolonial theoretical perspective, any system based on traditional categorizations immediately omits humanism since many are forced down a path

requiring they first restore their sense of self. Through this racial differentiation humanity has been allowed to “other” all but white males in consideration of human agency. In their quest to categorize, humans take for granted epistemological understandings of what is to be human. Human nature itself is socially constructed and positioned in the very systems categorizing it as ‘human,’ furthermore, knowledge cannot be solely grounded in the human subject since knowledge is also socially constructed (Nayar, 2014). Understanding personal experience and human interactions authentically becomes a recursive educational aim as we reject the current hyper standardization of curricular policy.

Following Dewey, we seek to understand what supports individual progress that is ethically without universal guidelines. As Halliwell and Mousley discuss, “Dewey sought to bridge the gap between his role as rigorous philosopher and his belief in the individual’s responsibility to find practical ways of dealing with social problems” (2003, p. 148). All students/humans must struggle to become simultaneously philosopher and human being; it is this pragmatism that must ground humanism when notions of humanity are in question. Dewey’s conception of humanism, although unable to equip people in equal ways for society, nurtures practical knowledge for more democratic social action via the empowerment of individuals.

## **Conceptualizing a Framework for Curriculum**

Understandings of curricular norms have been formulated, according to Gramsci’s (1978) analysis of curriculum, its creation and practice, used to manufacture consent via shared and required understandings of history (Chomsky, 1999). This historical apparatus for state control continues to shape the educational zeitgeist Gramsci’s analysis of intellectual and culturally controlling devices have been used to critique the maintained hegemony of the capitalist class. The preceding sections have identified these curricular practices as the apparatuses and identified the consolidation of power from which this influence is derived. Within these understandings, the Frankfurt school (Adorno, Horkheimer & Gunzelin, 2002; Marcuse, 1991) established a tradition of critiquing and naming the oppressive and reproductive nature of social systems. Theorists critiqued social inequality in an attempt to transform their own

lives while emancipating society through society's enlightenment (Horkheimer, 1982). The movement sustained a critique of capitalism, becoming the new European Left, using dialectics to create meaning via critical social analysis as they considered systems of oppression. Adorno's contributions to critical theory analyze the convergence of politics, economics, culture, and materialism, as systems of oppression, maintained through consciousness, requiring focused action and the recreation of consciousness for rebirth. Similarly, Honneth (2012) argues that the society's preoccupation with goods has not allowed for the necessary shift towards creating symmetrical relations of recognition which might create the space for focused, conscious action. Conditions created for non-wealthy, non-white students are often asymmetrical, reflecting society's fixation on the bottom line. Many students do not or cannot observe the asymmetry, while others see the asymmetry- but understand nothing, in effect killing democratic pluralism by means of humanistic indifference. For society this becomes what Jacques Lacan refers to as *objet petit a*, the fetish and ease of comfortable indifferent apathy, restricting intra-consciousness, accepting as a given the social relations of society (2006).

In their respective Marxist humanist analyses for identifying and naming systems of control, Raya Dunayevskaya and Peter Hudis consider the social, political and economic limitations which serve to exploit, oppress, and divide society, while emphasizing the value and agency of human beings as ethical and self determined. Dunayevskaya (1991) further called human beings to "recreate the revolutionary dialectic... in theory as well as in practice...(to) meet the challenge from the self-development of the Idea, and of deepening theory to the point where it reaches Marx's concept of the philosophy of 'revolution in permanence". In this way, Marxist Humanism situates itself within the discourse of the oppressed in attempts to reconcile the disparity between the socially stratified. As Dunayevskaya wrote in *Marxism and Freedom*, "all of history is the history of the struggle for freedom" (p. 89, 1958). This work is crucial for the Critical Humanist Curriculum as it frames an empowering consciousness, bringing the plight of workers, people of color, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender rights and the differently abled to the philosophical discourse for social action.

Hudis (2005) further observes, “The question facing us today is not to have development but what kind of development can meet human needs without relying on the value form of mediation.” In education as with labor, results, contributions, the –value added is what is important. Following Hudis we advocate not for “turning the clock back” on civilization but rather a focused shift towards humanity as policy within curriculum. Every student is valuable- not simply as deserving of the reallocation of resources, as some post Marxists have envisioned, but as critical social agents and self-determined human beings. Educational livelihood is unfortunately controlled via supra-capitalist forces- the means of neoliberal global capitalist exploitation. “The global self-expansion of capital is producing rampant destruction of natural habitats, innumerable species, and social cohesion has become so evident as to hardly invite serious challenge. Far more challenging, however, is the question of whether capital’s destructive course of self-expansion can be stopped before it consumes the lifeblood of the planet itself” (Hudis, 2005).

Much like contemporary capitalist society, education is infected with capitalist expansion, exploitation, and commodification, while student outcomes arrange the discourse in attempts to drive profit and production to new levels. As with society, the byproduct in education has been twofold: profit over people and ecological erosion (Chomsky, 1999; Kovel, 2007). As Dave Hill cautions, the realities and exploitation fashioning these conditions within mass public education is purposefully distorted, “Education also plays the ideological function of normalising death by starvation amidst a sea of plenty, or normalising immiseration and glorifying extreme wealth and exploitation of labour power, of pretending `we are all in this together”” (Hill, 2012, p. 15). Critical Humanism then provides an alternate vision, a framework of and for the reanimation of the educational ecology. As mentioned above, the crisis we observe is not a new occurrence, but one that deserves consideration. The continual deskilling of teachers and students and the perpetuation of standards of social control are buried in the norms of curriculum valued by much of western neo-liberally focused society that is the creation of a passive and uninspired workforce. The capitalist

curriculum expands via global neoliberal capitalist reproduction. Seemingly innocuous, this reproduction is perpetually caste disguised and intensified as new forms of commodity are fabricated and developed to institutionalize the social controls necessary to maintain and reproduce the capitalist domain (Rikowski, 2001).

### *The Teacher and School Policy*

Neoliberal global capitalist reproduction ensures domination by establishing the curricular framework for experiencing life in US public schools within what is considered the “appropriate culture”. This process begins with the training and licensing of bureaucratic teachers, discouraging teachers from acquiring, in teacher education programs, a critical humanist ontology and their envisioning in their practice the development of a transformative epistemology *vis a vis* meaningful, community and classroom based curriculum and pedagogy. Consider how teachers field questions from students, do they answer using prescriptive teaching models or manuals or do they engage in Socratic experiences with students accepting the transformation of the curriculum as a given?

The enslavement of teachers under a global neoliberal capitalist framework is ensured with the adoption of pre-packaged textbooks and materials, whether didactic or inquiry based; they ensure teachers work with students in preparation for exams in which success means circling the correct answer, drilling into their consciousness what it means to be intelligent; memorize information, adopt a particular viewpoint, rinse and repeat. The reproduction of this cycle is tied to school funding- improved test scores ensure schools receive monies ear-marked for classroom resources the supposed materials, prepackaged curricula and assessments, of higher quality. Only those who are fully funded are able to break the maddening cycle including, private schools and public schools with local bond measures, or fundraising. As David Harvey (2007) argues, “Neoliberalization has meant, in short, the financialization of everything. There was unquestionably a power shift away from production to the world of finance.” Education is no exception.

The above mentioned culturally and economically biased tests ensure funding is siphoned toward the academically successful students-students of means. Gay (2010) and others argue current testing practices are not explaining the discrepancy in scores. Rather, students of color and students of lower socio-economic classes who do not identify with the dominant, class-based epistemologies, generally do not identify with, value, or understand the larger implications of passing or failing tests. Perhaps the most powerful in-school factor, affecting students are effective teachers, (Gay, 2010; Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009) whose role becomes relegated to taskmaster or fact depositor. In this way teachers are discouraged from supporting students beyond standards based instruction outlined in policy, particularly those acting in ways contrary to dominant norms. Quality teachers often burn out because they do not have the social or psychological support of their community, possess enough cultural experience understanding or training to relate to diverse cultural needs within a pluralistic society or are limited by a lack of critical humanist curricular structures in support of teachers and students. Scholars such as Ladson-Billings (2009) Moll & Gonzalez, (2004) Nieto (2010) and others have studied the disparities and differences in the education of marginalized and impoverished populations with mainstream students and have suggested the possibility of transcending the racial and economic disparity via more complex and complete instructional practices, culturally responsive over mainstream understandings of curriculum.

Consider the framing of current curricular frameworks, as stated in Bourassa (2011), conditions for democracy are as possible as ever before in history, yet only in particular contexts is it realized. As Freire (2000) argues, a new horizon of possibilities- a phoenix can rise from the ashes of negative curricular practices. It requires, however, the indistinguishable spirit of struggle (Dewey, 1927; Giroux, Penna & Pinar, 1981; Pinar, 2004). The “system” of domination is as Giroux (1994) argues; true struggles are not often represented in the language of educational reform. As Basil Bernstein (1977), Pierre Bourdieu (1990), and Michael Apple (1979) have amply described, public and private schools serve to sort children. Those who attend elite schools are

funneled toward Business, Medical, Engineering and Political careers while children in marginalized schools become service workers and laborers.

## **Theorizing a Critical Humanist Curriculum**

It is clear upon examination of the research that both race and class matter in the classroom. Many studies have been conducted in which race has been disconnected from the study of class. Brown & De Lissovoy (2011) and Leonardo, (2012) are working to fuse these traditions for more accurate social descriptions for educational policy and theory. This paper acknowledges the value of these frameworks independently and joined in revolutionizing educational research, but is uniquely situated within an unexplored space; our focus in considering them is the classroom/community and practice. As mentioned above the modes of analysis by which we view possibilities for a critical humanist curriculum follows: critical theory/pedagogy (Adorno, 1983; Freire, 2000; Horkheimer, 1982; Marcuse, 1991; McLaren, 1989), critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 2006 & 2009; Nieto, 2010; Howard, 2010; Gay, 2010; Gonzalez, Moll & Amanit, 2005; hooks, 2004 & 2000; Talavera & Solórzano, 2012; Yosso, 2002), social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and Marxist Humanism (Dunayevskaya, 1958 & 1991; Hudis, 2005 & 2012; Ollman, 1976). We consider social relations of production: social class, social inequality, social stratification via the curriculum, more specifically the role education plays in contributing to the student's personal ontology and the possibility of their experiencing and developing transformative epistemologies, curriculum for human agency meant to eradicate the punitive nature of the standards and assessment based global neoliberal capitalist curriculum. Considered as a human "being" the parts of a critical humanist curriculum might be thought of as follows: the "body", humanism; critical theory, the soul; and Marxist Theory/Humanism the action. We recognize students-as-"beings" are the central focus of our practice. The humanization of practice positions the child as focus- the embodiment, the object upon which the curricular understanding is enacted. Critical Theory, the soul, represents the ability for students and teachers to look both within and outside themselves as they critique social relations of production, which have established the conditions for their lives. The human and critcity,



Rodriguez (2008) engendered take their place as the foundation for “Action”. Marxist theory and Marxist Humanism serve as the “Action” of the student and/or teacher for emancipation from those conditions that would oppress and/or alienate. An important consideration is the notion that, while this is revolutionary action, it is not a call for blood. We recognize that many violent and transformative movements cause the innocent and marginalized great suffering. We seldom find the vanguard of the revolution with their necks in the noose. Instead, we call for a revolution of the mind, one requiring careful consideration of community, participatory democracy and action. The critical humanist curriculum then serves to support human agency, challenging the exploitative nature of traditional curricular policy: analyses written into this paper address what schools teach and why, (Apple, 1977) the effect of a dialogical/dialectical discourse in the Hegelian/Socratic tradition, while also supporting revolutionarily critical pedagogy (Allman, 1999 & 2001).

### *Teachers and the Critical Humanist Curriculum*

The role of teacher includes coach, mentor, friend, provider, colleague, parent, and cultural worker (Freire, 2000). The possibilities for a critical humanist curriculum are contingent upon expanding the scope of a teacher’s role in the classroom. The teacher experiences her or his understandings of appropriate curriculum implementation using their own classroom experiences or training through teacher education programs and what policy experts, many of whom have little classroom experience, outline for teachers, continuing the potentially mindless bureaucratic system of schooling (Illich, 2002). As a result what is taught by teachers reflects the often-oppressive nature of the curriculum. Thus students and teachers make the curriculum- as they enact the classroom family- the transformation of schooling then becomes dependent upon an emancipatory and critical humanist education; the building of a school community whose aim is ensuring the education of human beings who will act upon the social relations of alienation and production.

Consider the following: ask anyone you meet on the street or in the classroom, does  $2+2=4$ ? Most often the response is yes, few will consider the question beyond the reductionist explanation of the

equation it is simple math, is it not? Consider the question further in light of the teacher who cares about her students, are there other ways we might understand this equation? Is simple math the only building block for a foundational curriculum, that is, teachers strictly adhering to curriculum policy? Consider the question still further, is values laden education, teaching students about life and about being human while also teaching math, more valuable than the strict enforcement of curriculum?

In the broader social context, students will understand curriculum variously through dialogue with their peers, received culture with care-givers or parents and Socratic seminars as they reimagine the world with their teachers. In the current educational climate, students can achieve success by asserting their self-determination in conjunction with external support (parents etc.) or if they have the means, likely in the form of private financial support (tutors, SAT class, not having to work while in school). As a society, U.S. school culture values and glorifies value added citizens, individualism, right and wrong, black and white, promoting assistance and amplification of the aforementioned reproductive and often culturally disparaging educational context. The philosophy and values, which are reflected in the current curriculum, support schools in the “creation” of good “citizens” which will “fit in” and be productive members of society.

As Harvey (2001) contends capital requires a smoothing of fractions as to be arbitrated for the common good. The understanding for this form of education is all students in US public schools must be afforded a similar educational experience, however as Hill warns the shifting of policies of oppression have long been a weapon of the capitalist class (2012).

## **Conclusion**

This is the entirety of the curriculum as previously defined- the totality of the student experience: forced enculturation, the suppression of alternative narratives, curriculum designed to exclude students according to race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, political beliefs, ethno-linguistic or socio-cultural background or any other non-dominant group.

How then do we help students co-create a critical humanist and revolutionary epistemology? The teacher understands (s)he is expected to impart the foundational curriculum for society, according to the popular notion, which help students understand more complex concepts as they develop skill in a given field, math, science language etc. A critical humanist curriculum then is a curriculum of empowerment focusing on critical analysis as a means of facilitation and inclusion in an effort to support student understandings and their agency as they engage and transform their world. Educators must not simply interrogate the oppressive nature of the curriculum; they must also fight the isolation the profession often creates. Our view of curriculum encourages collectives of critically minded teachers, professionals sharing lessons and modifications to curriculum that support student success by designing the classroom climate in such a way as to recognize a student's human right to critical inquiry, reflection and agency. The student as critical social agent ensures teachers develop curriculum culturally and socially relevant to their school communities. This view of curriculum frames education as a liberatory praxis, in support of students' imaginary (Pinar, 2004) and creative interaction with the world as they understand it, while challenging the conditions of the world in which they are expected to live. Successful generation of a liberatory curriculum requires a classroom in which students feel safe to express their understandings, one in which lived experiences are valued, and one in which lessons are seen as the formation of dynamic epistemologies.

If we accept as a given the existing social and economic policies affecting education we lose the freedom with which all human beings are born. Consider the following: Candace was rejected in the place she called home for expressing her life and culture differently from her classmates, teachers and her community. She found in Austin, Texas a home whose motto is "Keep Austin Weird". While comforting to those of us who fail to meet what the power structure deems normal or a standard human being, why do we have to occupy spaces labeled "weird" to feel we belong to a supportive community? Social pressure, pressure to conform to cultural norms ensures those on the left are outsiders. By confronting the reality that is- curriculum and instruction in

US public schools- we might take action with our students, the only challenge to the ontological reality that is subsumption, a revolutionary praxis and dialectical discourse wherein we reclaim significance in the educational experience. A perfect system of engagement among human beings may not be possible yet a relevant and supportive education can and must be realized. As mentioned above critical humanism lifts the fog of conformity to global neoliberal capitalist values and practice, this is teachers taking action with their students to a critical humanist ontological vision, a dynamic, democratic, socially just consciousness. To use the cliché: Hope can be analyzed within this curricular context in several ways. First, students who subscribe to the dominant curricular narrative have the hope that when they jump through hoops and create a cultural meta-cognitive shift (or consistency) within themselves, the system, which has created the framework, will reward them with financial stability and acceptance as it has for previous generations. Hope has a different implication within our understandings of the classroom. We suggest that students can hope to transcend the system, which dictates what they must be.

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