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Curriculum study, curriculum history, and curriculum theory: the reason of reason

THOMAS S. POPKEWITZ

This paper explores the intersection of curriculum studies/curriculum history/curriculum theory through the study of systems of reason that order reflection and action. Words about ‘learning’, ‘empowerment’, ‘problem-solving’, ‘self-realization’, ‘community’, and so on, are not merely there in order that educators should ‘grasp’ some reality to act upon. The words are made intelligible and ‘reasonable’ within historically-formed rules and standards that order, classify, and divide what is ‘seen’ and acted on in schooling. These rules and standards of reason are effects of power and the political of schooling. The first section explores this notion of the political and reason, considering curriculum as a double gesture. One gesture is the hope of schooling. The gesture of hope embodies fears of dangers, and dangerous populations. The latter, dangerous children, are placed in in-between spaces—the immigrant, the poor, the disadvantaged who are to be included, yet defined as different and abjected. The phrase ‘all children can learn’ illustrates the double gesture. The ‘all’ assumes a unity of the whole that differentiates and divides the cosmopolitanism of the child (e.g. the life-long learner) from the child left behind who is different and can ‘never be of the average’. Finally, it explores how the notion of research as finding ‘useful’ or ‘practical’ knowledge for changing the school inscribes this double gesture and, ironically and paradoxically, assumes a consensus that establishes a hierarchy that divides the researcher from those to be shepherded. The exploration of the system of reason in curriculum studies makes visible the limits of the present, and, through this critical engagement, makes possible other futures.

Keywords: education sciences; politics of schooling; school reform; social exclusion

Tom Popkewitz’s most important success as a scholar, and his contribution to the curriculum field, lies in his ability to use postmodern and poststructural theories as lenses for exploring curriculum issues, particularly those having to do with questions of reform and educational research. What is particularly noteworthy in this regard is the originally he has exhibited in developing explanatory categories rooted in these postmodern and poststructural theories.

Thomas S. Popkewitz is a professor and former Chair of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, The University of Wisconsin-Madison, 225 North Mills St., Madison, WI, 53705, USA; e-mail: tspopkew@wisc.edu. His studies focus on the systems of reason governing pedagogical reforms, research, and teacher education. His current book, Cosmopolitanism and the Age of Reform: Science, Education and Making Society by Making the Child (New York: Routledge, 2008) explores contemporary pedagogical reforms and sciences as practices that produce exclusion and abjection in their impulses to include.

Barry M. Franklin is a professor of education and adjunct professor of history in the School of Teacher Education and Leadership, Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services, Utah State University, Logan, UT, USA.

This paper is drawn from Thomas Popkewitz’s address when he received the American Education Research Association Division B Lifetime Achievement Award (2008). The introduction to Professor Popkewitz’s work is taken from Professor Barry Franklin’s letter nominating Popkewitz for this award.

The area of Popkewitz’s work that I know best is his research in curriculum history. His edited volume, *The Formation of School Subjects: The Struggle for Creating an American Institution* (London: Falmer, 1987) played a major role in the evolution of curriculum history as a discipline in North America by focusing attention on the role that specific school subjects have played in the evolution of curriculum thought and practice. While there have been studies of individual school subjects, Popkewitz brought a number of them together in one volume, included within them areas such as the history of special education that had up to that point been ignored, and situated those subjects in a political and social lens that pointed to their overall role in the curriculum.

One of Popkewitz’s important contributions to research in curriculum history is to introduce postmodern concepts as interpretive lenses for looking at issues in this arena. In his co-edited volume, *Cultural History and Education: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Schooling* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2001), in which I had the privilege to participate, he brought together a number of essays written from a postmodern perspective, and in the process defined a new specialty within the broad area of educational history, the cultural history of education. His new volume, *Cosmopolitanism and the Age of School Reform*, also uses postmodern categories to consider the long-standing regulative role of the curriculum as a carrier of Enlightenment ideas into the modern period.

Another of Popkewitz’s important contributions to curriculum scholarship has been his effort to explore the work of Michel Foucault and consider its implications for understanding the curriculum. The volume that he co-edited with Marie Brennan, *Foucault’s Challenge: Discourse, Knowledge, and Power in Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), is, in my opinion, the best collection of essays that demonstrate the applicability of Foucaultian ideas to curriculum issues.

Tom Popkewitz is a well-known and honoured international scholar. He has lectured and conducted research throughout the world. His receipt of honorary doctorates from universities in Belgium, Finland, Portugal, and Sweden and his election to membership in the Russian Academy of Education is a testament to the high regard his scholarship is held throughout the world.

*Barry M. Franklin*

The following discussion maps an intellectual project that focuses on curriculum as the study of systems of reason.¹ This notion of ‘reason’ goes against the grain. Reason is generally considered a property of the working of the mind (psychology), or as a universal logic determining the truthfulness of
statements. Yet there is nothing natural about, for example, ‘seeing’ the child through conceptions of childhood, stages of growth, and development, or to order school subjects such as literacy, science, and art as processes of problem-solving—or as communities of learners.

To focus on systems of reason is to consider the rules and standards that order the practices of curriculum and teaching. These rules and standards are historically produced, and function as cultural theses about how the child is, and should live. To talk about the child as, for example, a ‘problem-solver’ or as ‘disadvantaged’ invokes not merely categories to help children become better and more successful. These categories embody particular principles about what is seen, thought about, and acted on in schooling. The ‘political’ of schooling lies here: in the shaping and fashioning of what is (im)possible. The ‘reason’ of schooling embodies a style of comparative thought that differentiates, distinguishes, and divides. If I take the phrase ‘all children can learn’, it embodies inequality in the impulse for equality. The phrase generates a cultural thesis about who are the ‘all children’ that simultaneously differentiates and generates comparative cultural theses about who is not that child. The study of ‘reason’ as the historical event of curriculum studies draws schooling into a conversation with Foucault’s (1991) ‘governmentality’ and Rancière’s (2004) ‘partitioning of sensibilities’.

I outline here five themes for thinking about the intersection of curriculum studies, curriculum history, and curriculum theory. First, I explore ‘reason’ as the ‘political’ of schooling. Second, I discuss the notion of cosmopolitanism as an analytic ‘tool’ to consider the politics of curriculum. Curriculum embodies, I argue, cultural theses that differentiate the child who embodies the cosmopolitan hope of the future from the child feared as threatening that future. The phrase ‘all children can learn’ is an exemplar that simultaneously inscribes a cosmopolitan cultural thesis of the life-long learner with that of the child ‘left behind’ who is different and abjected, or cast out. Third, and ironically, I consider the ‘reason’ of curriculum reforms and educational research as double gestures: the reform impels for equity embodies and produces inequities and exclusions. Fourth, I examine historically the notion of research as finding ‘useful knowledge’, focusing on the politics of the ‘designing people’ that circulates in US progressive and contemporary urban reforms. Again I raise the issues of hope and fear in theories of schooling and its sciences. Finally, I attend to a curriculum studies that crosses geographical spaces to think about its different commonsenses.

The critical engagement with schooling is paradoxically a theory about agency embodying a cautious optimism about change, albeit located in different spaces from that of contemporary policy and curriculum research. I argue, borrowing from Foucault (1991: 75), that the object of research is:

[the] matter of shaking this false self-evidence, of demonstrating its precariousness, of making visible not its arbitrariness, but its complex interconnectedness with a multiplicity of historical processes, many of them of recent date.

The historicizing of what seems self-evident is a practice of resistance and counter-praxis, to borrow from Lather (2007). Making visible the authority
of existing systems of reason is a strategy to open to the future the possibilities of alternatives other than those already present.

The political #1: Curriculum studies and systems of reason

The idea of reason as historical and as an object of study is easily grasped if we look at the notions of reason in Ancient Greece. Reason was tied to a cyclical history, with no notion of cause or development. The past was the most truthful for giving guidance to the present as its wisdom came from the Gods. Looking to the ‘future’ was to engage in hubris as people sought something that only the Gods could give. The mediaeval church placed ‘reason’ in finding God. History was universal and, as God owned time, outside the province of humans. People who sought to control development were engaging in heresy. Chinese reason, in contrast, embodied narratives and images of things in motion and of relations in which people had no privileged position. There are no conceptions of the metaphysics or representation so dear to Western philosophy. Jullien (2006) pursues these differences between Western and Chinese ‘reason’ by asking why is the nude figure not possible in Chinese painting as the latter has none of the essentializing qualities given to human life found in Western painting?3

The historicizing of different principles of ‘reason’ helps to temper the mesmerizing and romantic qualities of educational words about ‘learning’, ‘empowerment’, ‘problem-solving’, ‘self-realization’, ‘community’, and so on. These words are not merely there for educators to ‘grasp’ some reality to act on and, to take a common phrase, ‘to get desired outcomes’. The words appear within historically formed rules and standards that shape and fashion reflection and action.

Take the notion of problem-solving: problem-solving embodies salvation themes about the future; the child’s problem-solving is to enable successful living in the future ‘learning’ or ‘information’ society as the cosmopolitan citizen, with self-realization and self-fulfillment. The salvation themes function in the curriculum as cultural theses about how one should live as a particular kind of ‘modern’ person.4 The kinds of problem-solving person being offered brings together, assembles, and connects different principles about who the child is and should be. These principles entail, for example, notions of agency in which the individual calculates, orders, and directs actions, conceptions of time that bring actions into a flow of development and growth that enables planning for the future, and the taming of change so that the uncertainties of life can be problem-solved, that is put into a regulated process. To develop curricula and undertake research on problem-solving is to theorize, regularize and rationalize processes to change people. The insertion of theories of problem-solving into the curriculum is an inscription device to order and classify conduct. The cultural theses of the problem-solver are not only about what a child is. They are also practices of governing what a child should become.

The notion of the political emerges in the instantiation of the cultural theses of curriculum and research. The rules and standards of the ‘reason’ of schooling partition what is sensible to hope for, reflect on, and do. The
partitioning of the sensible through the distinctions and differentiations of pedagogy are also practices of dividing and excluding. What counts as reason and ‘reasonable people’ who problem-solve, to continue with the early example, differentiate the qualities and characteristics of the problem-solver from that which falls outside of its borders of normalcy: the children who are ‘at-risk’, ‘disadvantaged’, have ‘low self-esteem’ or ‘attention deficit disorders’, who are inscribed as dangerous to ‘the reason’ and its envisioned futures of ‘reasonable people’.

The comparative style of thought within schooling is not intentional or bad faith, but is inscribed in the very rules and standards of reason that order schooling and much of modern life, at least from the European enlightenments to its present mutations (Popkewitz 2008). The comparative mode of ‘thought’ has been important in the formation of modern sciences and medicine by enabling the ‘seeing’ of things as parts related to each other, in forming the whole through which pathologies could be identified. When applied to social affairs and people, however, the style of thought made possible the comparisons that differentiated ‘civilizations’ through inserting hierarchies about the qualities of how people lived and ‘reasoned’ about life itself (‘advanced’, ‘less advanced’, ‘savages’), the inventions of modern eugenics, and the social and educational science that planned people through identifying what is different.

The political #2: Inclusion/abjection/exclusion in curriculum studies

In a European project on educational governance and social inclusion, Sverker Lindblad and I (Lindblad and Popkewitz 1999, Popkewitz and Lindblad 2000) explored how social inclusion and exclusion are embedded in each other—as parts of the same phenomenon—rather than being dichotomies, or binaries of logic. Issues of equity are premised, we argued, on the assumption that the right mixture of policies and programmes can eliminate exclusions and, at least theoretically, produce an inclusionary society. Our argument was that the very maps that target populations for rescue are also boundaries that differentiate, divide, and cast out particular kinds of humans into unlivable spaces.

Thus, while it seems counter-intuitive, the logic of inclusion/abjection/exclusion is embodied in the phrase ‘all children can learn’. The recognition of ‘all’ children assumes a unity and consensus about the whole from which difference is established. Furthermore, if I take contemporary US and European reforms that call for an education that produces ‘the life-long learner’, a cultural thesis is generated about life itself: life is, to paraphrase its language, one of continuous learning and flexibility through constructing meaning, problem-solving, and making choices to innovate while participating in ‘communities’. The only thing not a choice is the life of making choices! ‘Standards’ reform movements, benchmarks, achievement ‘gaps’, and professional teacher education reforms deploy the qualities and characteristics of the life-long learner as the unspoken thesis of the child occupying the space of ‘all children’.
The lifelong learner as a cultural thesis embodies the transmogrification of particular principles of the northern European Enlightenments' cosmopolitanism: a radical cultural thesis about life organized through human agency, guided by 'reason' and science, respectful of diversity, with hospitality and compassion for 'Others'. The cosmopolitanism was to create a unity through ascribing universal principles of reason and science that would bring a progressive and an inclusive humanity. The contemporary discourses about the life-long learner embody these generalized hopes of the future and progress guided by universal principles of reason and rationality. The historical particularity of the cosmopolitanism is, ironically, made to seem as universal and ahistorical. Isn't the very notion of life-long learner about an individual whose universal qualities of life seem to transcend history and social location as 'all' children and adults will be free and empowered if only enabled to continuously make choices?

The universality of the cultural thesis of the life-long learners simultaneously inscribes its opposite, the child who does not 'fit' into its space and is thus abjected into other unlivable spaces. When I read policy and research around contemporary US curriculum reforms, for example, the phrase 'all children can learn' inscribes comparative spaces: The life-long learner whose cosmopolitanism enables agency, problem-solving, and participation; alongside the pronouncements of the hope of the cosmopolitan child are fears about the child who threatens that future. The fears do not seem at first about the dangers and dangerous populations. The fears appear as the hope of rescue and saving the 'child left behind' from the 'achievement gap'. The hope that arises from fear is also about the dangers of the child left behind, who is different from 'all children'. The dangerous populations are particular 'human kinds' or particular categorizations of people, drawing on Hacking (1986), recognized and made different from the unspoken norms of others interned in the spaces of the narrative of 'all children'—the 'urban' or 'disadvantaged' child, for example, who is not cosmopolitan and in need of rescue and redemption.

The recognition of particular populations for inclusion, it is important to recognize, are responses to commitments about correcting wrongs; yet the very desire to include is inscribed in systems of thought that create continuums of value that differentiate, divide, and abject. This is evident in studying curriculum and teacher education reforms and research centred on the problem of equity. The salvation theme about 'all children can learn' is one about providing for a 'just society', that ironically entails narratives and images almost entirely focused on the kind of the child who does not belong in the spaces of 'all children'. Policy and research about standards of curriculum, for example, direct attention to the qualities and characteristics of 'the child left behind'; psychological distinctions about the child who lacks self-esteem, does not participate in the construction of knowledge, has 'low' expectations, lacks motivation, is not confident and/or is passive, and has different learning styles from the unspoken 'others'. The psychological classifications are discursively joined with sociological categories of, for example, dysfunctional families, juvenile delinquency, single-parent families, teenage pregnancy, and poverty. The psychological and sociological categories form as cultural theses about dangerous modes of life.
Who is this abjected child? What is the cultural thesis about its mode of living? If I use an examination of the different research programmes that describe ‘scientific evidence’ for successful reforms reported on the US Department of Education’s ‘What Works Clearinghouse’ website, the cultural thesis of the child ‘left behind’ and the ‘urban child’ merge as the child recognized as to be saved so as to be included, yet as different and thus never possible to be ‘of the average’. In an ethnographic study of Teach for America (Popkewitz 1998), an alternative teacher-education programme for urban and rural schools, the distinctions and differentiations that classified the urban child had little to do with geography. Children who live in the high-rise apartments and the renovated brownstones of US cities were not ‘urban’, but ‘urbane’ and ‘cosmopolitan’. Children living in suburbs and rural areas join with the children living in ‘the inner city’ who have ‘low expectations’, ‘low self-esteem’, ‘family dysfunctions’, and ‘poverty’. The urban child occupied a double position in the pedagogical reforms: there was recognition that programmes needed to be created to rescue and save that urban child—and the establishment of difference that made it never possible for the child to be ‘of the average’.

Working with Kowalcyzk and Popkewitz (2006) on Italian intercultural education helps me consider the inscription of difference and its erasures through the notion of abjection, redrawn from feminist psychoanalytic theories into a cultural theory to direct attention to the complex relation about inclusion, exclusion, and its in-between spaces. Abjection directs attention to the ‘child left behind’ as occupying multiple cultural spaces: the child recognized as in need of special programmes of remediation and to be ‘included’; at the same time the child’s recognition produces difference, and the child’s qualities of living are cast out into unlivable spaces. The categories of ‘immigrant’ and the ‘urban’ child are examples of the in-between spaces—not ready to inhabit the spaces of ‘all children’, recognized for inclusion but excluded by the instantiation of difference.

As I have noted, the inscription of comparative qualities is not to suggest intention or bad faith on the reformers’ part. Nor is it merely an aberration that is to be fixed by better, more effective theories, better empirical studies, or more useful knowledge. What I am focusing on are the complex patterns that circulate in the ordering of what is said, done, and acted on as practices of rectification, what I have called ‘systems of reason’. If I take the work of Tröhler (2005) about, for example, pragmatism, it requires understanding the complex ways that historical structuring of problems, defining the objects ‘seen’ and talked about that circulate through individual biographies. Tröhler (2005) explores, for example, the epistemological constructions through which Jane Addams and John Dewey’s (US progressive reformers) notions of social democracy are produced. He argues that the formulations of democracy and education embody reformed Protestant (i.e. Calvinist) ideas of unity and social harmony, the individual and society as an organism, and the missionary purpose of education. The epistemological ordering of the self and society was brought into the University of Chicago’s sociology, philosophy, and social psychology to define ways of thinking about urban reforms and the immigrant, and the African American family and child.
The Political #3: Inequity as equality in school subjects and pedagogical knowledge reforms

The construction of difference and abjection entails the inscription of inequity as equality. If I use the exemplar of reform in teacher education in the US, it is asserted that teachers need more subject-matter content, better pedagogical skills, and collaboration. The calls for action are seen as sensible and common sense: if you know more content, of course you should have a better understanding in teaching; and if you have more pedagogical skills in implementing that knowledge, even better. Finally, subject-matter knowledge and pedagogical knowledge are linked to equity through collaborative programmes of university teacher education, local communities, and schools to make subject matter accessible for ‘all children’ from diverse populations.

This common sense may, however, not be as sensible as it seems. The acquiring of more subject knowledge and pedagogical skills is not merely teachers learning more about how to teach. How one ‘knows’ a school subject entails participatory structures through which principles are generated about what constitutes disciplinary knowledge, how that knowledge is made knowable and acted on, and the distinctions through which difference and diversity are recognized. Learning more ‘content’ knowledge, then, is never merely that. It is learning principles generated about who the child is and should be.

The principles generated in school subjects can be thought of as alchemic processes (see Popkewitz 2004). Analogous to the 16th- and 17th-century alchemists and occult practitioners who sought to move ‘things’ from one space (base metals) into another space (pure gold), school subjects require transportation and translation ‘tools’ to move academic machinery (labs, university science buildings, historical society archives, etc.) and cultural practices into the school curriculum (e.g. theories of child development, selecting and organizing ‘content’ by age levels, and didactic practices to effect teaching, among others). The translation ‘tools’ of pedagogy are not copies of original disciplinary practices replicated in schools. Pedagogy entails systems of recognition and enactment that are acts of creation.

What constitutes school subjects is directed by psychological eyes, such as constructivist or communication theories. Psychologies of instruction are not, to draw on Bakhtin (1981: 294):

a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one’s own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process.

The distinctions and categories of pedagogy are ordering principles to constitute problems, and enunciate particular solutions and plans for action.

The notion of alchemy, then, directs attention to the principles of knowing and how to know produced with pedagogical translation tools. ‘Learning’ more subject and pedagogical knowledge is an act of creation structured through the pedagogical psychologies that order what is ‘seen’ and acted on.
It is not merely taking more disciplinary courses or applying some preordained disciplinary knowledge into children’s learning activities.

What are the limits, then, of the alchemy? I will list three that have emerged through studies of curriculum:

(1) The pedagogical psychologies are not historically concerned with or intended to translate disciplinary practices about, for example, how scientific judgements are made, conclusions drawn, rectification proposed, and the fields of existence made manageable and predictable. They were developed as pedagogies concerned with ordering conduct.

(2) The translation models of curriculum take for granted the comparativeness of the reason of curriculum and the unity of the whole that installs and erases difference. To return to an earlier discussion, the foci on ‘all children’, and the distinctions of those outside of its spaces, are assumed as natural in the making of the object of school reform.⁹

(3) The alchemy of school subject inscribes a hierarchy between the iconic authority of the expertise of scientific knowledge and the activities of children’s ‘learning’.

This hierarchy, drawing on Rancière (2004), entails a fear of democracy that installs inequality as equality. For example, the science curriculum and scientific literacy entails internationally an increased attention to student participation that has a double-sided quality (McEneaney 2003a). The increased participation is to signal greater activity and involvement of the child, and thus to make the school more democratic. However, that participation entails the increased and wider scientific authority over claims about the management of the natural world. Children’s participation and problem-solving are applied to learning the majesty of the procedures, styles of argument, and symbolic systems that assert the truthfulness of the expertise of science. Furthermore, when scientific literacy is considered, it has more to do with cultural theses about modes of living linked to collective belonging and the nation than with the knowledge that constitutes the literate in science (McEneaney 2003b).

The inequality appears in the knowledge of science as constituting ‘the real’ through which children are to organize their lives. Science is to shepherd the child’s possibilities in the world. Pedagogical knowledge is to enable the learning and the shepherding. Paradoxically, the watch-word required of the psychologies about ‘constructing’ knowledge, if we draw on mathematics education, is inscribed in curriculum to serve as modeling practices. Children are to use mathematics to model, predict, and test what is given as reality.

The flexibility of children finding answers or constructing knowledge is bounded by the fear (at least in the epistemological ordering of school subjects) of democracy. There is a divide between what science ‘tells’, and its truth-tellers, and the problem-solving of the child in the school. School subjects act as shepherds in ordering the boundaries by which experiences are acted upon, diversity is lived, and the self is located as an actor in the world. The language of teaching is about participation and empowerment;
the epistemology is of the child’s learning about the majesty of science to ‘tell’ what is given as the stable and consensually defined reality. I can only note here that the alchemical tools discussed above are not natural or inevitable in schooling, nor are they the only possible participatory structures in pedagogy. One could argue, for example, through science and technology studies for the use of different tools of translation. These studies view disciplines as having different epistemic cultures to order objects and establish the truth qualities of disciplinary knowledge.

To leave the subjects of reforms unsanitized—school subjects as a subject, the child as a subject, the psychologies and sociologies of ‘participation’ as practice—is to ignore the political. In a different context (and drawing on an epistemological lens), Butler (1993: 7) posed this erasure of the political when she said that:

Constructivism assumes the human agent and subject who guides either as a determinism or voluntary subject. My purpose is not to do away with the subject but to ask about the conditions of its emergence and operation.

**The Political #4: Research as the making of society by making people**

There is an almost ‘naturalness’ in today’s conversations about educational research being ‘useful’ in social planning and policy-making. It is the doxa, the unquestioned premise of many graduate programmes, and is increasingly heard internationally in professional and research groups as well as in government agencies concerned with school reform. The teacher asks without hesitation ‘What does this research tell us for improving classroom teaching?’ The university researcher is heard saying ‘How can this research be made relevant and speak to teachers and policy-makers?’ The sacredness of research in planning is implanted in conceptual distinctions that separate ‘theory’ from ‘practice’ and in talk about finding out ‘what is really happening’ (context) versus what policy-makers say happened (discourse). This ‘legislative’ function of (educational) science/research crosses ideological positions, political affiliations, and social positions. The demons are critical studies that do not provide useful knowledge and the deconstruction that does not seek to ‘fix’ the world.

The previous section gave reference to the planning of people within the context of the fear of democracy and the inscription of inequality as equality. What follows is a brief historical excursion about the research as planning that inscribes those fears. The social and educational sciences, I argue, as a practice of remaking society by making people, are not a logical outcome of science, nor was the idea of planning planned.

Historically, the notion of planning people is visible in the formation of the social and pedagogical sciences at the turn of the 20th century. The US social and educational sciences were embodied in cross-Atlantic Protestant social reforms linked with the formation of the modern welfare state in the planning for the care of its population. The faith in science had a millenialist belief in rational knowledge as a positive force for action. The US political
and educational movements associated with Progressivism directed the
notion of planning around what was called ‘The social question’, the
concern for reforms that could bring about changes in the conditions in
which the poor, immigrant, and racial groups lived in the turn-of-the-
century city. Legislation and planning for security against old age and
sickness, poor relief, public ownership and development of urban transpor-
tation, the planning of city streets and zoning, wage labour protection, and
the development of sanitary housing, among others, were reforms intended
to improve the conditions of urban life and possibilities for inclusion of
immigrants and racial groups.

Before the post-Second World War US anti-poverty public policy and
programmes made poverty and urban education categories of intervention,
the ‘progressive’ task of science was to study urban conditions to counter the
perceived disintegration and decay of the moral order in urban life. Ideas
of childhood, child-rearing, and family were interwoven with the problems
of moral disorder in developing public health, urban planning, and school-
ing. The new domestic sciences, later called ‘home economics’, gave atten-
tion to improving health conditions through rationalizing the ways in which
homes of the urban poor and immigrants were organized. Health was not
only about disease. Medical discourses were metaphors for child-rearing
that focused on cleanliness, neatness, and nutritional practices—seen as
producing the moral well-being of the child. Teaching children to sing in
music education was to exercise the lungs to prevent disease among immi-
grant children. Child psychologies gendered particular salvation narratives
about self-fulfillment and moral life through theories of the family and
child-rearing.

The sciences of the family and child were linked to an urbanization of
the notion of community. The pastoral image of a community of beliefs was
brought into the city to bring order, love, and collective belonging into the
industrial world. Early 20th-century US community sociology adapted the
German sociologist Tönnies’ theorizing about what differentiated the pasto-
ral community (Gemeinschaft) where, prior to modernity, neighbours come
closest to nature and God with that of a modern society (Gesellschaft) built on
abstract relations, and where the moral or ethical grounding of the memori-
alized pastoral images of Christianity were lost. Community sociology, the
pragmatism of Dewey, and the symbolic interactionism of George Herbert
Mead translated the pastoral image of community into the interactions and
communication patterns that could be thought to reinstall moral qualities to
US urban life.

The patterns of small-town community face-to-face relations were
(re)visioned as interactional patterns and communication networks for
urban life. The goal of the (re)vision was the elimination of the alienating
abstract social relations associated with modernity. The pastoral images and
narratives of community in urban life were to create collective belonging and
‘home’. The US community sociologies and social psychologies, for exam-
ple, brought together pastoral images with early Puritan salvation themes
with ideas of American exceptionalism, a narrative that placed the nation
and its citizen as a unique human experiment for moving civilization toward
the highest ideals of human values and progress and its people as ‘Chosen’.
Theories of growth and development—and the idea of progress in the educational sciences—linked stories and images of an industrious people who bring progress to humanity with those of the ‘manifest destiny’ of the nation. The seemingly different psychologies of Thorndike, G. Stanley Hall, and Dewey were given intelligibility through the overlapping of these images and narratives. Dewey, for example, saw no difference between a universalized notion of Christian values about the good works of the individual and the democracy of the nation. Pragmatism embodied these themes in the principles generated about community, problem-solving, experimentalism, and action.

Today the redemptive faith in science and its fears of the Social Question entail different assemblies relating community, problem-solving, and the urban child. One prominent teacher education reform reports calls for ‘reclaiming the soul of America’ (National Commission on Teaching & America’s Future 1996). The ‘reclaiming the soul’ of the nation is not about the past. It is a cultural thesis about modes of living that I earlier associated with the unfinished cosmopolitanism, the life-long learner whose life is one of continually making choices and innovation that never ends or has no seeming endpoints. The reclamation of the soul is directed to those who do not embody that soul because they are different and in need of redemption—the urban family and the child left behind. That rescue of difference embodies cultural theses of an ‘urban family’ (described in research as ‘fragile’ and ‘vulnerable’) differentiated from the unspoken norms about ‘all families’ because they have lower levels of education and socio-economic status, among others. These fragile families belong to populations of immigrants, the poor, and households headed by single parents (mothers) or teenage parents.11

My argument about designing communities, families, and children goes hand in hand with the inscriptions of ‘useful’ knowledge that entails a politics that should not be ignored. The notion of ‘use’ entails an assumption of a consensus about what needs to be done. Ironically, the very strategies of change that focus on useful knowledge serving teachers’ practices conserve the very system of rules and standards that order principles of inclusion, abjection, and exclusion. Scott (1991), a feminist philosopher, has drawn attention to this through her examination of ‘experience’ as entailing prior ways of ordering, classifying, and differentiating the world and the self in order to ‘see’ that experience and practice.

The Political #5: Different cosmopolitanisms and the reasoning/non-reasoning person in curriculum studies

I argued earlier that cosmopolitanism is a strategy to historicize the principles through which cultural theses are generated about how the child is to live, and should live. Embodied in cosmopolitanism are notions of agency, the ordering of the self-in-time, the rationalizing of reason, and the insertion of science into daily life as a set of practices to order conduct. The pedagogical principles generated about the child as a problem-solver, acting in communities and collaborating—sacred notions in modern pedagogy—embod
contemporary notions of cosmopolitanism in the practice of pedagogy. Further, cosmopolitanism is a tool to consider ‘reason’ as embodying practices that simultaneously include, abject, and exclude.

Most of the analysis in this essay has taken the US as its exemplar, although at points I have sought to explore schooling as embodying different cultural theses and as plural rather than a variation of a single pattern. This was to recognize that the invention of schooling was in fact part of a globalization that preceded the usage of that concept today. That globalization placed the problem of the social (re)construction of society at the foot of the child. Mass schooling was to produce the individual who embodied the transcendental principles that often were codified in the narratives that linked the individual to the citizen of a nation.

The analytic of cosmopolitanism provides a strategy to explore the historical ways that ‘reason’ and ‘science’ overlap to generate collective belonging and salvation themes. Cosmopolitanism is a strategy to examine the different connections, assemblies, and disconnections that generate cultural theses of the cosmopolitanism of the child and collective belonging. Brazilian, Mexican, Columbian, and Chinese school reforms in the early 20th century, for example, embodied cultural theses that linked salvation notions of the individual with the nation (see, e.g. Buenfil Burgos 2005, Qi 2005, Sánchez-Obregón 2005, Warde 2005). Do Ô (2003) argues, for example, that the beginning of modern schooling, pedagogy, and the sciences of education in Portugal were designed to act on the spirit and the body of children and the young. Examining French and Portuguese pedagogy at the turn of the 20th century, do Ô explores the method of the pedagogical sciences as observing and making visible the inner physical and moral life in order to map the spirituality of the educated subject (‘the human soul’). In 1885 the French pedagogue, Gabriel Compayré asserted that pedagogy is an applied psychology and the source of all the sciences ‘that are related to the moral faculties of man; pedagogy contains all the parts of the soul and must use always psychology’ (cited in do Ô 2003: 106).

Today cosmopolitanism in pedagogy is expressed in a language of globalization and fatalism. In a European study of educational governance and social exclusion, teachers and school and ministry officials spoke about globalization as something that is here, and the reforms of schooling are to enable students to become successful in the new global world (Lindblad and Popkewitz 1999). What constitutes the conditions that made it possible to talk of globalization were not entertained; it was assumed to be an inevitable fact to which the school curriculum and teaching are to respond.

Yet what is called globalization today is not a new phenomenon. The progressive education movements, for example, as well as the emergence of the welfare state in the late-19th century were embodied in a globalization that included the formation and institutionalization of social and educational sciences as empirical disciplines. What is important is consideration of the historical conditions that made possible these formations and the epistemological principles generated about what is seen, talked about, and acted on. Further, it is important to question how the principles governing conduct and the forming of the self are different today from past processes
of globalization, including asking about the conditions that make possible today’s discourses of globalization as a signifier of change and cause.

Toward a study of curriculum/curriculum history/curriculum theory

The historicizing of reason and rationality as political is an analytic to map the limits of the common sense in contemporary schooling, not a denial of the significance of reason itself. Nor should the previous discussion be read to deny the importance of the commitments that underlie current reforms and the sciences of education. The historicizing of reason and rationality is to provide different strategies for engaging in those commitments. It is to make visible the ‘materiality’ of curriculum. Rabinow (2003: 3) suggests, for example, that knowledge is political, ethical, and aesthetic:

[Knowledge] is conceptual because without concepts one would not know what to think about or where to look in the world. It is political because reflection is made possible by the social conditions that enable this practice (though it may be singular, it is not individual). It is ethical because the question of why and how to think are questions of what is good in life. Finally, all action is stylized, hence it is aesthetic, insofar as it is shaped and presented to others.

The curriculum study and curriculum theory that I discuss entails what might be considered as a history of the present (see, e.g. Dean 1994; see also Popkewitz et al. 2001). It is to consider what is taken as ‘natural’ to see, think, and act in the present as historically produced; and that the double sense of the subjects of schooling—the disciplines that organize curriculum and the child as the object of change—is the political (Popkewitz 1997). The historicizing of the subject of change is, as the feminist philosopher Butler (1993) argues, to challenge what is uncritically taken as natural in regulating and producing subjects.

The historicizing of reason raises a question about the adequacy of research that classifies the problem of reform as the consequence of neoliberalism, and the reduction of school policies and curriculum to the economic ‘person’. A close reading of school policies, programmes, and research suggest that the economic words do not stand alone, and in fact quickly morph in the texts to cultural theses about modes of living and to salvation themes only tangentially related to entrepreneurialism or some universalized category of ‘workers’. I say this not to abandon attention to economics, but to recognize what 19th-century theories about moral economy spoke about; that is, economy was about cultural conduct in managing society through managing the family and individuality.

This brings to the fore the historical question of neoliberalism and whether it should be treated as an epoch and cause of the events of schooling. While the category is helpful for some questions about schooling, it runs the risk of assuming the very conditions of that language. The appearance of Reaganism, Thatcherism, and the policies of the World Bank, for example, do not just appear, and secure sanction, because of the wisdom or power of these actors. Neo-liberalism was assembled in a historical grid that preceded
and gave intelligibility to its policies and discourses. As Hultqvist (1998) has argued for Sweden, the very school policies that occur in the late-1980s and early-1990s were made intelligible through a range of earlier changes in the conceptions of the child and schooling. To assign the political label given to state policy as the problem and the cause of social change is to make theories of policy susceptible to the reproducing the very analytics in what is explained, including its critiques.

Finally, I want to address the notion of the useful or practical knowledge in educational research that is part of contemporary doxa. I realized that my explorations of the limits of the reason might provoke demons by not pronouncing and prophesizing what would save the school, teacher, and child as the outcome of this study. Worse, I realize that the critics of such critical thought would argue that the very notion of critical is a ‘deconstruction’ that brings forth a negativism in a world that needs correction now. Never mind that the system of reason argued here has little to do with Derrida’s notion of deconstruction. Such a fact would not belie the more general belief that if one engages only in critical investigations, there is certainty that inequities will reign as there will be no direction to what the future will be.

There is a politics to these arguments that has little to do with finding ‘useful’ or ‘practical’ knowledge. First, arguing historically, notions of ‘useful’ and its corollaries of ‘practical knowledge’ and praxis in contemporary research are shaped more by a faith born as the effects of power than by subjecting that faith to sustained analysis of social planning and the history of social science. As an aside to this, little does the call for ‘practical knowledge’ recognize that the two different but important Enlightenment projects of Kant and Marx gave expression to the importance in change of the making visible of what is taken as natural. Those who are familiar with Kant will recognize the importance given to public debate and the critical thought that it generates; those familiar with Marx will recognize that his work was historical—to place the emergence of capitalism, and was a pragmatic project rather than stipulated through some intellectual notions of what is useful knowledge or praxis.

Second, and as important, the very assertion of ‘useful’ knowledge leaves unexamined the distinctions that order the subject acted on by research. The assumption of ‘democratic education’, for example, has been to identify and organize the strategies to intervene and remediate those in schools, families, and ‘communities’. The calls for participation and collaboration in reforms takes for granted the subject (and their subjectivities). Ironically and paradoxically, arguments about ‘useful’ knowledge assume a consensus and harmony in reform. This assumption denies the political of schooling (Friedrich et al. in press). To consider the political embodied in the call for ‘useful’ knowledge, one can think about the work of socialist political philosophy (Mouffe 1993, Rancière 2004) through which there is what might be called an anti-praxis (see Lather 2007). Rancière, in particular, has helped us to understand how the foundations of philosophy and social science have inserted a hierarchy of change in calls for useful and practical knowledge. That hierarchy separates the researcher from those studied in a manner that inscribes and produces inequities in its very formulations.
In light of these limits, it is possible to change the territory for engaging in issues of agency, resistance, and change without foregoing the general commitments expressed in contemporary research. It embodies a cautious optimism that entails moving to a territory outside of current theories of agency that inserts the agent within the shepherds’ hierarchy. It can be approach through the intellectual insights and mode of thinking provided by Derrida. Derrida’s (1997) deconstruction is an architectural metaphor inviting us to consider the limits of what is accepted as natural and self-evident. To explore an ‘architecture’ is to probe the techniques through which structures are constructed. It is ‘an attempt to visualize that which establishes the authority of the architectural concatenation in philosophy’ (p. 321). That questioning is to locate a style of thought that confronts the logo-centricism of Western analytics to make fragile the tyrannies that come with the acquiescence to accepted authority.

It is within this paradigmatic quality of thought—the making fragile the causality of the present—that agency and resistance are possible through opening up of other futures than those confined to the frameworks of present. Derrida’s deconstruction and Foucault’s governmentality, among others, are trajectories indebted to enlightenment attitudes about reason and agency in confronting problems of the present that do not forgo social commitments.

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Notes

1. What follows draws on Popkewitz (1991, 1998, 2008). Saying this is not to imply an evolution of thought but merely to focus on different elements and particular arguments that I believe have relevance to curriculum studies.
2. I use the notion of schooling to consider the overlapping of the different practices through which ‘reason’ is generated about reflection and action—curriculum, psychologies of the child and teaching, research, reforms, teacher education, and so on. I will use ‘schooling’ as a phrase that embodies the different categories.
3. If I think about the works of Foucault, Derrida, Deluze, and Guattari, for example, they are attempts to rethink the logo-centricity of Western thought, and overlap in some ways with certain of the qualities that Jullien (2006) discusses in relation to Chinese aesthetics that describe different conditions of possibilities. The confrontation of different philosophical orientations directs attention to how truth is known and told. Jullien’s discussion suggests the historical limits to much of contemporary arguments about Eurocentricity through the comparisons that he engages.
4. In an interesting discussion of this issue, Hacking (1986) focuses on how the social sciences and policy make ‘human kinds’; a notion that is homologous to what I am referring to here as ‘cultural theses’.
6. The paper (Kowalczyk and Popkewitz 2006) is related to Kowalczyk’s dissertation. Her education of me as we wrote invited me to travel through feminist theories that draw on
psychoanalytic traditions and then redeposit them in a historical, cultural, and sociological analysis.

7. I am drawing here on studies of the alchemy of school subjects and, more recently, work that I have done with Daniel Friedrich.

8. The alchemists were important to the formation of modern chemistry and commerce (e.g. McCalman 2004). The schools’ alchemy has a different social trajectory as it functions to generate principles of reflection and action.

9. The work of Gustafson (2009) is instructive here. She examines the social and cultural practices through which music appears as a school subject in the US from 1830–1930. Music education gave focus to singing and listening skills (music appreciation) designed to produce moral behaviour on the part of immigrant and African American children, whose styles of life were seen as threatening the stability and harmony of the nation; and to eliminate practices that would lead to degenerative social lives, such as listening to certain forms of jazz. The theories and studies of the psychology that calculated children’s listening skills and the measures of music appreciation functioned as processes of differentiating and abjection.

10. This and what follows are explored in Popkewitz (2008).

11. To consider how the categories are given universality but are historically distinct one might consider the contemporary US descendents of the Puritans as an ethnic group. They never appear in such a mapping.

12. An interesting discussion of the notion of actor and agency is in Meyer and Jepperson (2000).

13. The history and politics of planning in social and educational science is discussed in Popkewitz (2006 a, b).

References


