Leaders' Voices— Putting Theory into Practice

Teachers, Public Life, and Curriculum Reform

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ABSTRACT: Discourse related to curriculum and teaching reflects the points of view of those involved and cannot be separated from issues of history, power, and politics. Dominant views of curriculum and teaching claim objectivity, but they fail to link schooling to complex political, economic, and cultural forces, and they see teachers as technicians, bureaucratic agents, and deskilled intellectuals. Thus, a critical theory of curriculum must consider questions of representation, justice, and power. Toward this end, teachers' roles should be restructured so they become critical agents who take risks (or "go for broke") and act as "public intellectuals" who bring issues of equity, community, and social justice to the fore.

REASSERTING THE PRIMACY OF THE POLITICAL IN CURRICULUM THEORY

The connection between curriculum and teaching is structured by a series of issues that are not always present in the language of the current educational reform movement. This is evident, for instance, in the way mainstream educational reformers often ignore the problematic relationship between curriculum as a socially constructed narrative on the one hand, and the interface of teaching and politics on the other. Mainstream curriculum reformers often view curriculum as an objective text that merely has to be imparted to students.[1]

In opposition to this view, I want to argue that the language used by administrators, teachers, students, and others involved in either constructing, implementing, or receiving the classroom curriculum actively produces particular social identities, "imagined communities," specific competencies, and distinctive ways of life. Moreover, the language of curriculum, like other discourses, does not merely reflect a pregiven reality; on the contrary, it selectively offers depictions of the larger world through representations that people struggle over to name what counts as knowledge, what counts as communities of learning, what social relationships matter, and what visions of the future can be represented as legitimate (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993).

Of course, if curriculum is seen as a terrain of struggle, one that is shot through with ethical considerations, it becomes reasonable to assume that talk about teaching and curriculum should not be removed from considerations of history, power, and politics. After all, the language of curriculum is both historical and contingent. Theories of curriculum have emerged from past struggles and are often heavily weighted in favor of those who have power, authority, and institutional legitimation.

Curriculum is also political in that state governments, locally elected school boards, and powerful business and publishing interests exercise enormous influence over teaching practices