

Thinking Critically About Classrooms and Curriculum

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT CLASSROOMS AND CURRICULUM

Negotiating School

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FOREWORD

This series begins with an introduction to some foundations of critical thinking. In this book, we discuss the effects on classroom curriculum development and practices of thinking carefully and critically about what we bring to our teaching. We detail one way of developing a critical awareness of each person's **social identity/ies** as being comprised of multiple aspects of identities which are simultaneously occupied, and how one person may be both socially **privileged** and socially **marginalized** at the same time. We also discuss how these **identity categories** come together to inform how each of us experiences the world in which we live, including school.

This series of “small books of big ideas” positions all of the participants in the schooling process (students, teacher, parents, policy makers) as agents in an interactive process of knowledge production (Hardiman and Jackson, 2007; Bell and Griffin, 2007). In addition to identifying and recognizing categories of privilege and/or marginalization, we examine the effects of explicit acknowledgement of the systemic operations of the categories of privilege and ask integral questions about the power relations which inform what knowledge and whose knowledge is valued and delineated within a classroom or school setting.

What we know is that most often, it is the students/children who are members of a marginalized group (or more than one such group) who end up being alienated from school and its curricula. Magda Lewis has suggested that all of us are diminished by a school system and educational process that does not “honour the history, culture, social realities, abilities, and diversity of each of us” (Lewis, 1993, page 194).

While our series of “small books of big ideas” each have distinct focus areas, we work to ensure the intersections and effects upon one another are made clear and are explicitly articulated. For example, a person is not “just poor” – they are simultaneously many identity categories and those interplay with one another; to be poor, an immigrant, a person of colour, and a young adult female, will be different than to be poor, white, have a physical disability, and be a middle aged male. Yet often, when a focus is placed on only one category (for example, on poverty and income inequality, which is the foci of Book Two in this series), people are spoken of as if it is the same experience for all of the people who occupy that category.

We share the belief that educators can and must be **agents of change** so that schooling experiences and processes are accessible and meaningful for all students. Further, we maintain that this work needs to be comprised of more than slogans and empty rhetoric; it needs to be purposeful in both intent and in practice.

We have done our best here to write in a deliberately

conversational tone, to unpack and make accessible the ideas of other educators, theorists, and researchers. At the end of each book, we provide a list of suggested resources for those who may wish to further their reading in some area or another which we discuss. We also outline some classroom activities to support the focus of each book.

INTRODUCTION

“...teacher education for social justice is not merely activities, but a coherent and intellectual approach to the preparation of teachers that acknowledges the social and political contexts in which teaching, learning, schooling and ideas about justice have been located historically and the tensions among competing goals” (Cochran-Smith, 2010, p.3).

Conversations about **oppression**, marginalization, **at-risk children**, and the specific manifestations of these issues, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, et cetera, are neither novel nor unfamiliar in educational circles. Well-intentioned educators have grappled with how to address these issues for years. As university educators who teach within a **social justice framework**, we acknowledge these lived realities and the everyday effects they have on individuals. We also believe that there is a parallel perspective to this which is equally important to discuss: a strenuous and deliberate examination of privileges: what they are, who has them, how did that happen, and what does it mean in some lives? This ongoing conversation weaves its way through our work and writing. As R.W. Connell (1993) said: “An education that privileges one child over another is giving the privileged child a corrupted education, even as it gives him or her a social or economic

advantage” (p. 15). We believe that to talk only about “the poor” or the “racially visible” or “the marginalized” without considering the overarching operations of privilege is to cast some people as Other (Delpit, 2012; Elia & Eliason, 2010; Daniel & Antoniw, 2018; Sanford, Jayme, & Monk, 2018) without interrogating the Us. While schools are often spoken of as places to “level the playing field” of social inequities, the reality for many students is that schools perpetuate marginalization and sometimes oppressions as reflections of the larger social structure of **systemic inequities**. At the same time, many schooling practices, including curricular practices and content, are based upon a specific set of values and knowledges that support and perpetuate a normative middle-class and **Eurocentric** view of the social world.

Issues of social justice appear in various provincial curricula, but are often, we might even say usually, taught sporadically (in the sense that it appears to be individual teachers who implement this **pedagogy**) and in isolation from a pedagogical discourse around issues of diversity. As teachers ourselves and as teachers of pre-service educators, we recognize the importance of creating pedagogical situations that empower ourselves and others, of demystifying the “**master narrative**” of our society, of clarifying how relations of domination subordinate and demarcate subjects according to their gender, ethnicity, race, class, sexuality, and myriad other indicators of “difference.” We must remember, however, that we can never speak for each other; we view the world around us from our

own subject positions, always. The key, perhaps, is in “learning how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we all can flourish” (Lorde, 1984, page 112).

Teachers are held to a higher standard of behaviour than many members of the general (non-teaching) public, and perhaps we should be. Parents and guardians entrust us with their children. Students bring into our classrooms their cultures, races, identities, orientations, genders, socio-economic classes, religious or spiritual affiliations, abilities, language backgrounds, etc., and it is our job to teach all of them to the best of our ability, not just the kids who look like us, talk like us, pray like us, or come from the same communities that we do.

One of the most important things to remember is that this work is not about assigning guilt or blame; it is about understanding how things were in order to understand how things are, so that we can see and work toward how they could be. None of us are responsible for how things were, but we are each responsible for choosing how we will respond from this day forward. This is an ongoing – indeed, a lifelong – learning process. As Maya Angelou said: “I did then what I knew how to do. Now that I know better, I do better” (ascribed, unsourced). Or, as Shrek said, “I’m like an onion. I have layers”. We all have layers – never-ending layers – and being a self-reflexive, critical-minded teacher will mean always being prepared to peel back another layer to look beneath.

PART I

MAIN BODY

1.

CONVERSATIONS

Nothing connected to, nor contained within, schooling is a neutral, values-free enterprise. The risks involved in stepping onto the terrain of transformative possibilities in education become less onerous when they are held up to the reflective lens of more traditional methods of viewing and actuating schooling and schooling practices. Although it might be frightening to “take apart” the world as we know it, to try to envision the world of schooling as it might or could be, not taking those risks means staying with what we already have. When these taken-for-granted assumptions about schooling and schooling practices go unnoticed and/or unchallenged, we as educators are contributing to an environment in which active and **inveterate** harm is a very real and probable consequence for many of our students.

One of the things that our work is about is having **courageous conversations**. In order to have these courageous conversations, there are some parameters that must first be set up in order to have effective conversation while also attempting to do no harm to the classroom participants. We set these parameters in our classrooms of adults, and model

and articulate both how to develop respectful spaces and the need to develop these agreements. The conversations are important – indeed, they are crucial to doing social justice pedagogies. But they cannot be enacted in a room at the expense of some. In plainer words, it is not okay to set up a learning environment where some learn and others are harmed. We use the example of colour-blindness to talk about this with pre-service teachers: well-intentioned teachers will sometimes say “Oh, I don’t worry about racism in my classes – I treat all my kids the same. I just don’t see colour.” And our response to that is “Well, how incredibly dis-respectful that is.” **BIPOC** children walk into our classrooms every day already knowing, already having experienced, the everyday and ongoing disparities of the social world in which they live. If they are then met by a teacher who in effect says “I don’t see/recognize the everyday material conditions of your life” then they are being asked to leave integral parts of their life outside the classroom. And when some children are expected to do this, and other children (that is, non-BIPOC children) are allowed to bring their whole lives into their classrooms, then we have a racist, inequitable foundation to every single thing that then happens in that room.

Now – this is a very hard conversation to have – and we are having it with adults. We acknowledge that in some ways, it might be even a harder conversation to have with children in schools. But hard does not erase the necessity. So we work with pre-service teachers to figure out strategies for how to

have these necessary, difficult conversations – with them, and in their turn, with their students.

One of the first parameters we discuss and set up is language: there are some language conventions to consider. To begin, we assume that everyone is doing the very best they can/have at this moment in terms of language/knowledge/understanding. Based on that assumption, we need to get our conversations and questions out there. There is often a fear of speaking up in this context because someone thinks they don't know "the right words" – and that is legitimate – language changes – this is a good thing because, as our views change and grow, the language we use changes and grows too. We would always prefer to have someone ask a question using the most respectful language they know, rather than not ask their question. If the language has changed, we can answer the question and talk about the language – so we learn two things simultaneously. If the questions aren't put out there to discuss, then they just go underground, and learning doesn't occur. As Beverley Daniel Tatum (2008) asks in her book *Can we talk about race?*:

Can we talk about race? Do we know how? Does the childhood segregation of our schools and neighborhoods and the silence about race in our culture inhibit our capacity to have meaningful dialogue with others, particularly in the context of cross-racial relationships? Can we get beyond our fear, our sweaty palms, our anxiety about saying the wrong things, or

using the wrong words, and have an honest conversation about racial issues? (p.xiii, italics in original)

One of the terms we use frequently in our work is “the dominant group”. It is important to know that when this term is used, it does not refer to a numerical majority. In **critical pedagogy**, dominant group refers to the people who have – or had – the most access to law and rule setting.

One of the things that we as teachers discourage is the use of phrases such as, “This is probably a dumb question, but...” because that statement is almost always a gendered statement (this type of statement is overwhelmingly a lead-in from women in our classrooms) and the statement itself leads listeners to dismiss what you are going to say before you even say it. Similarly, we dissuade the reliance on such phrases as, “I’m just playing devil’s advocate here, but...”. If you have a thought or opinion, own it – even if it is just for that moment. Failing to take responsibility for what you are about to say in a public space, such as a classroom, can sometimes mean people don’t stop to think carefully about what they want to say, or the harm that might be caused to another listener, because they can brush off the harm done because it was some ephemeral “they say”.

With respect to opinions, there is a common perception in Canada that everyone has a right to both hold and to speak their opinion, under “freedom of speech”. This needs to be unpacked a little. Each of you – each of us – is certainly

entitled to hold any opinion at all. However, when it comes to freedom of speech, to say it wherever, whenever you wish, is simply not true. In the national context, we have federal legislation which states, very specifically, that you cannot say anything you want, wherever you want to, if what you want to say is legally regarded as hate speech and if the place in which you want to say it is a public space. Freedom of speech in Canada is protected as a fundamental freedom within the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Freedom of speech in Canada is not absolute, however: Section 1 of the Charter allows the government to pass laws that limit free expression so long as the limits are reasonable and can be justified. The same rules apply in this country's public school classrooms and to the teachers who occupy those spaces. Two notable examples of teachers who violated this tenet are the cases of Jim Keegstra and Malcolm Ross. First charged in 1984, Keegstra was charged under the Criminal Code of Canada with "willfully promoting hatred against an identifiable group". After numerous decisions and appeals, in 1996 the Justices confirmed that Keegstra's claims of freedom of speech could not and should not be used as justification for the dissemination of hate propaganda in his classroom instruction. In 1991, Malcolm Ross was accused of creating a toxic classroom environment; again, after numerous decisions and appeals, in 1996 the [Supreme Court of Canada](#) ruled that Ross's removal from the classroom was justifiable, on the grounds that, "[although it did constitute a violation of his](#)

[freedoms, this was a reasonable limit, as schoolteachers must be held to a higher standard of behaviour.](#)” For those who wish to read more thoroughly about this case, see W. Hare’s (2013) insightful and incisive *Propaganda in the classroom: The Keegstra case*.

Every province and territory in Canada has at least one governing body that oversees the licensing and professional conduct of its public school teachers. Each provincial and territorial governing body also has a Code of Conduct or Ethics, to which its licensed educators must adhere. Without exception, all of these various Codes of Conduct have a written clause that says, in essence, that teachers should avoid giving offence to the moral and/or cultural principles of pupils and/or their parents/guardians, or to engage in behaviours/conduct that bring disrepute to their profession.

Another parameter we set up in our classrooms, in order to have these necessary courageous conversations, is to be very clear with our students that there is a final authority in the room as to if or when a conversation needs to end. We are absolutely firm on this: the teacher – in our university classrooms, that is us, and in their classrooms, it will be them – must be prepared to stop a conversation if it has veered from honest, open inquiry into a place where harm is being spoken or visited upon another, whether or not they believe that other someone to be in the room. And we also remind them that they have no idea who is actually in the room. You cannot assume anything at all about another person by looking at

them. And when we have that conversation in our classrooms, it helps to set up another measure of respect and safety. Nevertheless, at the end of the day, it is the absolute responsibility of whoever is the teacher in the room to simply and absolutely end a conversation that has taken that turn into harm. As Joe Kincheloe (2008) says, in discussing conversations he had with Paulo Freire, “It is the teacher...who is responsible for the health, safety, and learning of students. To deny the role of authority the teacher occupies is insincere at best, dishonest at worst” (p. 17). And while the teacher is the final and absolute authority, we do not set ourselves up as the only authority; we have had students speak up to say that something that has been said is harmful, or hurtful, to them, or about someone in their lives. This learning process happens for all of us in the room, as a collective, and is in no way a one-way process. That’s not how dialogue and conversation works. We share here one example of an incident that happened a few years ago: one of us (it was Valda) for some now not-remembered reason went off in class one day about the horrors of a recently-opened big-box store, and how these enormous stores destroy communities and shut down small businesses, and contribute little to local economies, and etc. At the end, she said “And that’s why I will never shop in Store ABC”. And a woman who was a student in the room leaned back a little and said “Well, isn’t it nice that you have the financial security to be able to choose where you will shop based on your politics, and not where you get the most impact for your

money”. And wow – what a learning experience for every single person in that room – including the not-nearly-so-proud-of-her-politics-now teacher at the front of the room.

Our experiences (between us, sixty-five years of teaching) have contributed directly to our passionate belief in the crucial importance of teachers not only being invested in having courageous conversations in classrooms, but also of the necessity of teachers having opportunities to learn how to have these conversations, with one another as colleagues and in classrooms with children. One may hold a belief in social justice or the need for social equity, but strongly held beliefs are only one part of actually doing this work; in our experience, many teachers hold a strong desire to be effective, supportive agents of social change, but they simply do not know where or how to put this passion into active practice within their classrooms. To this end, we work to develop, with our students, our classrooms to be spaces of open and reflective dialogues. Our teaching is designed to illustrate and support teacher awareness, student engagement (and, therefore, also classroom organization and “management”), and the social contexts within which teachers and students interact with schooling processes. In our teaching, and throughout these small books, we provide examples of everyday work being done by many teachers already, breaking down activities and curricular practices to examine the ways in which we can build and rebuild what we do for the respectful support to which all students are entitled.

We offer one example here as illustration of how we do this in our own classrooms: a couple of years ago (2019/2020), a video was making the rounds on social media, which depicted a high school teacher who had lined up his students at one end of a field. He proceeded to ask a series of questions, accompanied by directions to take a prescribed number of steps forward if a particular statement were true in someone's life. The questions he asked were all linked to social privilege, whether that privilege was income related, racialized, gender related (he did stay away from sexuality and religion). By the time he stopped, some students were halfway up the field, and others were left at the starting line. Our pre-service teachers (and indeed, some of our graduate students) thought this was a wonderful exercise, one which would immediately illustrate social inequities, those ways in which the "race is won by those on the inside track", to use Didi Khayatt's (2000) language and example. In the view of many of our students, the video was an excellent, tangible demonstration that allowed students to "learn about privilege". We invited our students to re-watch the video, and instead of watching the students on the move, focus on the faces of the students left at the starting line. Then we had conversations about for whom this "excellent learning experience" was a benefit: the answer, of course, is for students who themselves hold privilege (unconscious though they may be to this). The students left on the starting line are already keenly aware of the social inequities with which they themselves live on an everyday basis; to have that not only

reinforced through this activity, but to be the subjects of the startled gaze of the students further up the field, resulted in active harm for some of these students. You can see their faces, their body language, as they realize what is happening as the teacher asks more questions: some of them turn away, sit down, or hang their heads. We talked with our students about an imperative that is inherent in the training of medical students: “First, do no harm”. We believe that this is equally as vital for teachers, to use in their analysis of all of their planned classroom activities; indeed, to keep at the forefront of their minds as they develop curricular lesson plans for the day/week/term.

In addition to the principle of do no harm, we support the call of R.W. Connell (1992) regarding the need for educators to rethink how we plan our curriculum for enactment in classrooms. Connell says:

The principle of advantaging the least advantaged...has strong implications for curriculum...and the way the current **hegemonic** curriculum embodies the interests of the most advantaged. Justice requires a counter-hegemonic curriculum (Connell, 1988), designed to embody the interests and perspectives of the least advantaged (1992, p. 139, italics in original).

Starting from ‘the standpoint of the least advantaged’ in our planning processes, indeed, in all of our work, from curriculum development through implementation, offers a

jumping off point from which to develop more equitable classroom practices.

2.

IDENTITY

We operate within a highly **codified** social system, one that is frequently neither rational nor just. We cannot think about power and marginalization without first locating ourselves in relationship to it. We must stand in sometimes “uncomfortable shoes” and examine our own privilege. For many people, including ourselves, privilege is so subsumed within the taken-for-granted everydayness of our existence that we may not even recognize the ways in which our lives are privileged (Tatum, 2007). Doing this work, and teaching through this lens, is an often uneasy attempt to balance, of seeking to understand and be respectful of lives that are different from our own, while simultaneously ensuring that we are not “speaking for the other” (Alcoff, 1991/92, pp.5-32) in ways that erase the lived experiences of lives that are different from our own. The best of intentions, offered through an unconscious taken-for-granted position of privilege, often result in more harm than the good we had hoped for.

An identity is an intricate web of life experiences, choices and lifestyle. A person’s individual identity is nested with family, gender, ethnicity, friendships, morals and interests,

among other things. While identity is a large term, applied to diverse areas of interest, defining aspects of personal identity can be examined in terms of what it means to be a unique human being. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2013) refers to this framework of overlapping identity markers as “**intersectionality**”, the process of examining various categories such as religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, etc, that interact to create our social identity. The same framework of intersectionality is used to understand social inequality and how it affects people who share the various categories.

There are a couple of very important things to know about these social categories:

a) The first is that every single one of us – and every single person – has a place in every single one of these categories. Our place may be one of social privilege, or it may be socially less-privileged or marginalized. Whether we know it or not, or recognize what it is or how it functions, we have a place in the category.

b) Secondly, every single one of us occupies every single space simultaneously – and so do our students (as does everyone we meet every day). Thus, a student may be a young Black woman – that may be what we see; and she may also be – at the same time – she may be a young, middle-class Black woman who is questioning whether or not she is heterosexual, and what this means inside her Christianity, and she may have an undiagnosed

learning disability, and so on. And all of these things are a part of who she is in every moment of every day.

We often begin our courses by asking: So, what does all of this mean for us as teachers? How do we make our classrooms safe and accepting and welcoming spaces for students who occupy these various social and cultural identities? How do we work with the provincial/territorial formal curricula and documents to ensure that content is taught, and done so in a way which also encourages students to think carefully about the content. And how do we do all of this and also attend to the complex and myriad aspects of selves which every single person – students and teachers – bring to our shared classrooms every day?

Because of the ways in which **formal curriculum** and schooling policies have been developed principally by the culturally-dominant group, teachers often – mostly – have (and do, although to a lesser degree) come from the socially-dominant groups. Many – though not all – teachers went through a schooling system that spoke to them, that provided a place of belonging, that sense of belonging that said to them, this is about you. Their teachers looked like them, their history books taught their history or their ancestors' version of history. School policies were developed based on their cultural and community values, so many of them liked school, enjoyed school, were successful in their progress through school, and ended up/chose to come into a teacher education program. As we recognize this process, it is important to ask: Are these the

only people who would be interested in becoming teachers, or did something else happen somewhere along the way that told some people that becoming a teacher wasn't going to be available to them?

We use a multitude of social identity categories to speak about ourselves, and about other people. Sometimes, these identity categories are a positive thing, helping us to know who we are, and to be able to seek out other people with whom we can converse, be comfortable, and be ourselves. Sometimes, however, identity categories are used differently, whereby negative associations are attached to particular categories, which may then result in having particular assumptions about that person or group of people. Critical pedagogues sometimes refer to this as a process called “**Othering.**”

Critical educators suggest that the reason this Other-ing becomes a negative process is because it represents only one side of the story – and in a linguistic sense, this is quite accurate – in order to establish someone as an Other, there needs be an opposite to that – and that opposite is I, Me, We, Us. And this Us is most often not discussed, and is often quite unrecognized, at least by the people occupying the Us position, whatever that may be in any given conversation.

In 1979, Henri Tajfel and John Turner proposed a **Social Identity Theory** which held that there are three cognitive processes relevant to a person's being part of an in-group, or of an out-group; such group membership being, depending upon circumstances, possibly associable with the appearance

of prejudice and discrimination related to such perceived group membership. These three processes are:

Social Categorization: The process of deciding which group you belong to. At its most basic and non-involved level “any group will do” and no necessity is seen for conflict between groups.

Social Identification: The processes by which you identify with an in-group more overtly. The norms and attitudes of other members within that group are seen as compatible with your own or worthy of emulation by yourself.

Social Comparison: Your own self-concept becomes closely meshed in with perceptions of group membership. Self-esteem is enhanced or detracted from by perceptions of how in-groups and out-groups are held to behave or are held to be able to perform or to rate in society (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 33-37).

(Of course, while the above is a description of the process for one’s own self, we also have a similar process when looking at other people or groups of people.)

In recent years, Tajfel and Turner’s work has generated the creation of multiple variations of something called the [Social Identity Wheel](#). In its simplest form, the Wheel features a circle that is separated into 11 categories. Each section, starting at the top and moving clockwise around the circle, is labeled: ethnicity; socio-economic status; gender; sex; sexual orientation; national origin; first language; physical,

emotional, developmental (dis)ability; age; religious or spiritual affiliation; and race. There are many exercises that have been developed using the Wheel, and they can be easily found using a quick search online.

In our classes, we use the checklist below to talk about identity categories and what they mean. When we have these conversations, it is important to know/remember that this content is not about assigning “blame” to people who were born with more/most social privilege. When we talk about our responsibility moving forward, it is important to know what did happen in order to know how things got to where they are now, so that we can decide how best to move forward, and how that is more effective than feeling guilt or blame for the past.

IDENTITY CATEGORY	MINE/MY IDENTITY	MORE/MOST PRIVILEGED	LESS PRIVILEGED
RACE			
CULTURE			
ETHNICITY			
SEX			
GENDER			
SOCIAL CLASS: status accorded to employment/ occupation			
SOCIAL CLASS: status accorded to income			
SOCIAL CLASS: status accorded to manners, values, norms of behaviour			
RELIGION			

AGE			
ABILITY: physical			
ABILITY: cognitive/ intellectual			
ABILITY: mental health			
SEXUAL ORIENTATION			
REGION/ COUNTRY OF ORIGIN			
AGE			
ANYTHING MISSING FROM THIS LIST			

[Full-size copy of table in Appendix.](#)

Adapted from Lyon, Catalano, Shlasko, and Runell (attributed as original developers, adapted by many other writers and in various formats)

We hand out the list in class, and the very first thing we ask students to do is to not fill it out in class. Once they have the list in their hands, we discuss the ways in which being in a public space, such as a classroom, and being asked to fill out this form in that public space, could make some people uncomfortable. There may be parts of their identity that they prefer to not share with others at this (or any) time. And by modelling this with our pre-service teachers, we also model how they can use this sheet to have conversations more safely with their own students. Plainly put, it isn't any of our business what someone's personal identities are; what is important is that we be able to talk about the categories of identities and what they might mean for students and teachers in schools. Using the checklist, we begin to move into the realm of having courageous conversations, both with each other and in our classrooms. Having courageous conversations means talking about the "hard stuff", and doing that in the best way we know how to do. It means using the best language we know, and asking our questions, rather than being silent because we don't know how to ask. What this suggests, then, is that when and where we may perceive a reluctance to talk, either in ourselves or from others, we need to understand the discomfort and then work past it. Not speaking doesn't change anything; understanding where something is coming from opens the possibility of effecting change within ourselves, and then with others.

Sometimes, as we talk our way through the list together,

there are words/categories that are unfamiliar to some of the participants. We ask students, if this happens, to ask themselves: is it possible that this is due to your own position in that category being one of privilege? Privilege is often rendered invisible in its operations, so it becomes something we don't have to think about at a conscious level.

3.

CRITICAL CURRICULUM

Conversations about curriculum can be very convoluted, since there are many definitions of what a curriculum is, and there are also many different faces or types of curriculum/curricula. In having these conversations, it is necessary to try to be clear about what kind of curriculum you are discussing. While there are different words used by various theorists, in this book we talk generally about the formal, the informal, and the hidden curriculum. The formal curriculum is generally agreed to comprise the official documents and policies that are provincially or regionally developed, usually by departments of education, and then given to teachers for classroom use. The informal curriculum generally is understood to comprise the things that teachers do, and teach, that are not necessarily written down; this informal curriculum might include such things as teaching children to raise their hands to ask to leave their seats, or how to move through hallways when changing classes, or extra-curricular activities (and who gets to participate in them, whether they are sports or drama or music programs) and a range of behaviours that are generally accepted to be a part of “how one does school” and are also

generally accepted to be a part of a teacher's job, although not explicitly written down as such. Then there is the hidden curriculum. As John Portelli articulated in 1993, there was then and remains today some disagreement about how to define the hidden curriculum, or indeed, whether or not such a thing even exists. Most critical theorists, particularly those who believe that schools either are or could be – or should be – spaces that encourage, develop, and support social justice, social equity, social diversity, do believe in the existence of a hidden curriculum within schooling processes. We find Portelli's (1993) identified meanings (within curriculum discourse) to be most useful:

- The hidden curriculum as the unofficial expectations, or implicit but expected messages;
- The hidden curriculum as unintended learning outcomes or messages;
- The hidden curriculum as implicit messages arising from the structure of schooling;
- The hidden curriculum as created by the students (p.345).

We agree with Portelli that “...educators have the responsibility to make the hidden curriculum as explicit as possible” (1993, p. 343). We tie this to the work of Lisa Delpit (1988) and particularly to her discussion of the “culture of power” that operates in and through schooling processes. It is worthwhile

to share these five aspects of the culture of power here, as they are an integral component of a critical pedagogy:

- Issues of power are enacted in classrooms.
- There are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a “culture of power”.
- The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.
- If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.
- Those with power are frequently least aware of – or least willing to acknowledge – its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence (Delpit, 1988, p. 282).

Delpit contends that the first three of these rules are now generally accepted as truisms within academic work around the sociology of education, but that the last two are generally either less accepted, or are seldom discussed. While she made that claim in 1988, this appears to be still the case for many more than thirty years later. Our own experience working with these codes of power with pre-service teachers has been that many of them accept the first two – sometimes three – as being “fact”, but are either less aware of, or less willing to accept the veracity of, the fourth and fifth codes. Thus, we focus much of our discussion around the need for clearly and explicitly

bringing students to a conscious awareness of all of the rules or codes of power, in order to develop truly transformative classroom spaces. It must be said here that in no way does making the rules explicit mean that we suggest an assimilation process, as particularly code number four might suggest (“being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier”). Nor is it Delpit’s intent to suggest this; rather, she – and we – believe that it is only through clearly understanding how these codes of power operate that individuals can make choices to be, as Paulo Freire (1998) suggests, liberated and freely choosing humans. Like Portelli (and of course many others), Delpit maintains that educators have an explicit responsibility to both recognize the existence and operations of these codes of power, and to make them explicitly known to students, to offer them greater chances of success in school.

We use a metaphor we call *The Lighted House* to unpack or illustrate how one could think about these codes of power:

Imagine, please, a large house standing in the middle of a lawn. All around the edges of the lawn are shrubs, then trees. It is night-time, and the house is fully lit up inside. Now, imagine some people inside the house, and more people outside. Some of the people standing outside are quite close to the house, and others are across the lawn, near or behind the shrubs, or standing amongst the trees. Now, imagine all of the people looking at one another. The people inside the brightly

lit house can probably see a few of the people who are standing very near the windows, as the light from inside spills out into the yard a few feet. But the inside people will have much greater difficulty seeing the people who are further away, near the shrubs, or in amongst the trees. In fact, from inside of the house, many of the people outside will not be able to be seen at all. However, for the people who are outside, no matter where they are standing, the people who are inside the house, standing in front of the brightly lit windows, are clearly visible.

It is this, we believe, that Delpit is referencing particularly in code number five: “Those with power are frequently least aware of – or least willing to acknowledge – its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence” (1988, p. 282). If the people inside the brightly lit house are the people with power, and the people outside are the people with less or no power, then those without power are able to see the operations of power much more clearly than are the people who have the power and might be unconscious of that fact, or of the operations of that power in their lives.

The Curriculum Circle

Using the three aspects of curriculum as defined by Marsh and Willis (2007), those being the planned, the enacted, and the received curriculum, we focus primarily on the received.

We encourage exploring answers to questions such as: who are our students? What are the everyday lived experiences of their lives that they of necessity bring into our shared spaces when they come to school? How do the material conditions of their lives affect how they receive the “stuff” of schooling – the formal curriculum, and also the policies, practices, values, assumptions, and requirements of being a student? Who are we as teachers? And how do our students receive us? For we – and all teachers – are also an integral component of what a curriculum is.

We work with the belief that school success is more often achieved, or more easily achieved, when students are able to connect themselves in some positive way to at least one aspect of school, whether that aspect is a subject, a friend, an activity, or a teacher. This connection allows for the sense that one belongs, or has a place of belonging, within this space; if one does not belong, it is difficult to connect, to engage. But if one does have a sense of belonging, then engagement, while not guaranteed, is more possible. Some might ask – indeed, some do ask – why it’s so important that teachers help to create an environment where students can see themselves? We start with our students by asking them to think about socially comfortable environments versus socially uncomfortable environments, whether it’s a library or a cocktail party, or standing on the side of a mountain tied to a zip line harness. After a brief discussion of how an individual might experience these varying spaces where one is either comfortable or

uncomfortable, we then ask them to think about what happens for children when they come to school.

It is a commonly held understanding – although occasionally challenged – that the primary task of students in school is to receive the information that is the content of the formal curriculum – that is to say, the things we teach – and to absorb those things and then reflect back to us what they have taken in (learned). This is generally acknowledged to be the primary process of school. There is, however, another significant aspect to this process which remains largely undiscussed and unacknowledged. We refer to this as the Curriculum Circle, and in general terms, it looks as follows:

We draw a circle on the board and write formal curriculum inside the middle of it. So you have a child that comes to kindergarten on the first day, and that child walks into school and they see teachers who look like them. They encounter teachers and curriculum documents and school policies and practices, particularly when we're talking about kindergarten and grade one, with which that child is very comfortable. They know, or they very quickly cue into or pick up on the inflections in teachers' voices. We reference again Delpit's (1988) codes of power – the ways teachers speak, so that some children come to school and they understand when the teacher says "let's all line up now, okay?" that it is not actually a request. It is a requirement, even though the inflection of the teacher's

voice has turned it into—and the use of the word ‘okay’ has turned it into – an apparent question that might for some children seem to imply choice.

So some children see themselves in the faces and bodies of the teacher, they encounter norms and values inside school policies and practices that they either already know or they’re comfortable with. That is, they go through school and develop more and more familiarity with the curriculum content. They, again, see themselves, hear themselves, encounter their communities and values and ancestors being presented, and in positive ways. Their task is a single one – to proceed through school and demonstrate how successfully they have absorbed the information that we call knowledge that is contained within the formal curriculum.

For many children, however, school consists not of one process, but of two, both of which happen on a daily basis from the first day of school to the last. Children who come to school and do not see themselves in the formal curriculum, whose history/ies are not the ones contained in the texts, whose values and beliefs are not those espoused in the policies and practices of school, whose teachers do not look like them – these children must do two things. They must still absorb the information of school and return it to their teacher in a demonstration of “what has been learned”, and they

must also try to make sense of the reality that school, which is supposed to be a welcoming space of belonging, seems to not be a place of their being able to belong, for they see themselves reflected nowhere. This cognitive dissonance – this ongoing event which makes no sense for many children – can lead to resentment, confusion, despair, apathy, anger, or leaving. Not always, but often.

These children come to school and they encounter the same expectations and curriculum content, and policies and processes, and the same teachers, but they have to do two things because they don't see themselves reflected, or reflected positively, in curriculum content. They don't encounter policies and practices that value the communities from which they come, or the family in which they live, or take into account their families and their values, community culture, traditions, or beliefs. As an example, there's an expectation on the part of many school teachers and many schools that field trips are just a good thing, without acknowledging that for some families, they're not at all a good thing because they cost money that the family doesn't have.

So some students have to do two things. They still have to take up the content, reflect it back in defined, appropriate kinds of ways that demonstrate that they have taken up this knowledge. They know stuff, so they have to pass the tests or the projects or whatever. But

they also, and simultaneously, have to try and make sense of being required to be inside an institution every day where they can't find a place of belonging for themselves; an institution that in many instances says fairly specifically to kids, *'you don't belong here. We're not talking about your history or we're not talking about it in positive kinds of ways. We'll refer to your ancestors in derogatory kinds of ways. We won't talk about contemporary First Nations people (as one example). We won't talk about the history of **colonialism** and **colonization**, and deprivation and the **residential schooling system**, and the **reservation system**. Those things will not be part of our curriculum,'* so the only ways some children are going to encounter themselves at all in formal curriculum is through very negative kinds of ways, or exclusion. And if they try to speak their reality, they're often shut down or punished, made to leave the room because they're disruptive.

Our work as educators begins, therefore, with an acknowledgement of all of those wonderfully disparate bodies that occupy our classroom spaces. We must believe that all of our students can succeed. We need to see our students as individuals with immense capacity for creativity. We must respect the individual needs of all students and foster a caring and creative environment that supports the social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development of each person. Big

responsibilities? Absolutely. But not impossible. We're teachers: we've got this!

PART II

CRITICAL THINKING ACTIVITIES

4.

TEACHER EYES

This is an exercise we often do on the first day of class with pre-service teachers. We simply ask them to look around the room we are in, and pick three to five things that they could use to teach a lesson that in some way incorporates social justice awareness, or enhances critical thinking processes, and then to write down one or two lines about how they could do this lesson. It is often a slow start, so we come to this class with a plastic, disposable water bottle. Using it as an example, we ask how this water bottle could be used to start a discussion with students about some aspect of social awareness or social justice. Usually, someone comes up with the idea that teachers could talk about recycling, something as basic as reminding students in their class that the disposable bottles can be recycled, and telling them where the bins are located. Then someone comes up with an add-on – the disposable bottle could lead to a discussion of using disposable versus more permanent water bottles that can be refilled. Or perhaps a discussion about how plastic bottles are produced (and of course this applies to both disposable and many re-usable bottles). Once the ideas begin, a myriad of lesson plan ideas start coming forward: where does

the water come from that goes into disposable bottles; what effect on local communities is there when water is being diverted to bottling factories; who makes a profit from companies bottling and selling water; what parts of the world have the privilege of being able to bottle and sell water, versus parts of the world where there is little to no (clean) water available; who has access to indoor plumbing and water that is available at the turn of a tap, versus countries/places where people have to walk for hours for water, or find some other means to transport water home. This last turn in the conversation usually leads to someone bringing up that we are not necessarily talking about other countries – there are places, communities in Canada where residents do not have access to clean, safe drinking water, or sometimes to indoor plumbing. And then this conversation goes off in its own directions. And all from one disposable water bottle!

The point of this exercise is two-fold: first, it starts the critical thinking about social awareness conversation on day one, in an easy manner; and, secondly, it is a quick demonstration that to be a teacher who does this kind of work doesn't require flashy supplies – it only needs whatever objects you can pick up, an inquiring, curious mind, and a willingness to seek out information.

Your turn: what lessons can you come up with using the following common items: a banana (hint: do bananas grow in Canada? Ever? Think about transportation); a shoe or sneaker (we have had some spirited conversations about child-labour in

lesser-industrialized countries when certain brands have been brought into the discussion); and of course, our electronic devices, of which nearly every adult student in our room has between one and several (everything from the environmental impact of building them to the financial status attached to them).

5.

WRITING STATIONS

Working from the premise that to hold our necessary courageous conversations can be very hard, we try to offer a variety of ways for students to interact with the work of critical pedagogy. Whole class discussions, readings, small group discussions with assigned questions and assigned roles/tasks, Jigsaw Puzzle and Expert Reader assignments (these are outlined below) are all strategies we employ. We also sometimes use Silent Writing Stations as a way of encouraging dialogue. Note: we are sharing several of the quotes we have used, but really, any quote or piece from an assigned reading, or even thought-provoking statement, will work.

We set up five or six writing stations around the room (our university classes are usually under forty students, and our rooms have tables and chairs rather than desks – some teachers might need to adapt these instructions slightly). Each table contains: two different coloured empty folders – let's use red and blue for ease of understanding. Red is marked "For sharing" and blue is marked "Private. Do not read". Also on the table are several copies of one quote; that is, each table has a different quote or statement, but on each table there are several

copies of that one quote or statement. Last, a pile of blank paper is provided. Students are asked to go to a table, read the statement or quote, and then on a blank piece of paper, write their own thoughts/responses to it. After about five minutes, we ask students to change tables; before they leave where they are, each person decides whether they want to put their writing in the red folder or in the blue one. They may choose to put their name on their writing, but it is not a requirement. If they put their work in the blue folder, no one else will read it. Not even the teacher. It will go directly into the shredder at the end of class. If they put their writing into the red folder, the next students to come to the table now have two choices: they can read the statement/quote at this table and respond on their own, as per above, or they may read the writing of colleagues from the red folder, draw a line and write a response to the previous student. Generally, we move students about four times, or for about a half hour.

At the end of the silent writing process, we hold an open class discussion about any aspect students wish to share based on this experience.

Some quotes/statements we have used:

“While child-centred pedagogies tend to speak in terms of “the child,” critical pedagogies ask “which child?” ...those most likely to be alienated from schooling are those on the margins of social power.” (Smith et al, 1998, p. 29)

“Simply caring about students, while necessary, does

not constitute a critical pedagogy. The power dimensions must be brought to bear in a way that discerns and acts on correcting the ways particular students get hurt in the everyday life of schools.” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 2)

“No emancipatory pedagogy will ever be built out of theories of behavior which view students as lazy, defiant, [or] lacking in ambition...” (McLaren, 2002, p. 93).

6.

JIGSAW PUZZLES AND EXPERT READERS

We often use these two exercises in conjunction with one another. Again, with so many of our own activities and teaching strategies in our classes with pre-service teachers, these can be easily adapted by teachers to use in their own classrooms. Jigsaw Puzzles: we assign one article to be read in pieces by several students – we just number the class off into 123s, then assign all the 1s pages 1-8 of an article, the 2s pages 9-15, and the 3s pages 16-24. This sectioning off allows us to use longer articles without overwhelming students with reading tasks, and allows students to really focus on their few pages. In class, we ask all the people who were number 1s to come together into a small group (or a few small groups – three to four people is best), and do this for all the sections/numbers – these are the Expert Readers groups. Then we ask each small group – remember, they all had the same section in common – to take about fifteen minutes to discuss their section, ask each other any questions they had from reading their section, and finally to write down several key points that summarize the section they read.

Next, students leave their Expert Reader groups, and form a new set of small groups, each of which has all of the sections represented – Jigsaw Groups. Talking in the order of the article, those with section 1 explain their section to the other people in their group, who did not read that section; then the 2s share, and then the 3s. In this way, after twenty to thirty minutes of small group discussions, each small group has had the opportunity to hear about the article in its entirety.

In addition to allowing class members to focus their reading time on one smaller section, in order to be ready to share with their groups, this reading/sharing strategy can be used by teachers in a number of classroom settings to support students. Those who read much more slowly than their classmates may have their anxiety lessened to have a smaller number of pages assigned to read; those who are not comfortable speaking out in front of the whole class, or responding to open-ended questions, may find it easier to speak in smaller groups, and with a specific focus of sharing what they read.

7.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT QUESTIONS WE ASK

Q: How do we set up classroom activities to get to know our kids without (possibly) putting them in harm's way – unintentionally, but still...?

To think about for the above question: when we have social privilege, we often share our identities without even stopping to think about what a privilege that is. But what if a child does not have that same possibility? What if we ask a child to share something about themselves that causes them to feel that they are required to share something with the class (or even just with you as their teacher) that they would prefer to not share? For example, an innocuous question from a teacher such as “Hey small person, what work do your mom and dad do?”. Think of the assumptions in this question: 1) that there is at home both a mom and a dad, rather than one or the other of those, or two moms, or two dads; additionally, many children live with grandparents, in foster care or group homes, and there are no moms or dads at all, of any number. Assumption

2) is that whoever the adult/s in the home, they are employed; this might not be true either. Assumption 3) is that whoever the adults are, they identify within a binary-sex system such that the gendered pronouns of mom/dad/grandmother, uncle, etc apply. And those are just a few things that could come up for some children in trying to answer what seems to be a very simple question.

Whenever we ask questions of students, or ask students to participate in an activity, we need to stop and carefully think through what else could happen for students in our classrooms when we ask them this question, or ask them to do this thing? What other unintended consequences or difficult situations could our students end up with because we unintentionally put them in the path of harm?

8.

EVALUATING CLASSROOM MATERIALS FOR BIAS

One activity that pre-service teachers do in our classes, and that can also be done with their classroom materials and students, is to examine the materials used in their classes for bias; it could be racial bias, gendered bias, social class/income bias, abilities bias, religion bias, and so forth. We use the **Nova Scotia Bias Evaluation Instrument** with our students.

We assess curriculum documents, policies, and supplemental resources; the most fun resources are children's (elementary age) books with their illustrations and fewer print words, and they are also often the easiest to use in the beginning when learning how to assess content for bias, because it's often just so strikingly obvious in children's books.

9.

THE STORIES WE TELL IN SCHOOL

Stories are told for a purpose; sometimes the purpose is as simple as sharing an occurrence, or for entertainment. More often, stories have a learning component attached to them; from fairy tales to myths to fables to curriculum documents, the stories we tell are usually purposeful.

A grounded example of how one story is told in a specific but inaccurate way is Herbert Kohl's (1991) article *The politics of children's literature: The story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott*. After reading this article, identify the story that is generally taught in schools about Rosa Parks, versus what Kohl outlines as the truer story.

In schools, stories are often told explicitly (the formal curriculum), or may be told at a more general societal level (think about the stories being told when we tell children to use "indoor voices" or to behave in particular kinds of ways). Or, school stories may be told by educators to themselves or to one another; for example, some teachers will argue that they ought to be allowed to teach the novel *To kill a mockingbird* (Harper Lee, 1960) because "it's history, it's a factual account of how

people spoke/thought/behaved back then, it doesn't do any harm today to read those words/attitudes, because they're long gone". Of course, this is not at all the case; these words and attitudes do still cause harm today, and the attitudes and beliefs that underlie them are not history, but still with us in 2022.

Working in small groups (or this can be an individual writing assignment), and drawing on your own memories and experiences of school, identify one curriculum story, one societal story, and one teacher story you encountered/were taught. The task here is to learn to recognize stories as just that – stories that are told for a purpose. Once you have identified your examples, analyze them for the varying effects each story had/has/could have on different groups of children.

GLOSSARY

Agents of change

a transformational leader working tirelessly to make bold ideas a reality in order to create a more equitable, effective educational system

At-risk children

a term often used to describe students or groups of students who are considered to have a higher probability of failing academically or dropping out of school

BIPOC

an acronym for Black, Indigenous, People of Colour

Codified

compiled into an orderly, formal code of expectations and behaviours

Colonialism

is a practice or policy of control by one people or power over other people or areas, often by establishing colonies

and generally with the aim of economic dominance. In the process of colonization, colonizers may impose their religion, language, economics, and other cultural practices.

Colonization

the action or process of settling among and establishing control over the original inhabitants of an area

Courageous conversations

conversations in which individuals are encouraged to express their views openly and truthfully, rather than defensively or with the purpose of laying blame. Integral to courageous conversations is an openness to learn and think differently.

Critical pedagogy

a teaching philosophy that invites educators to encourage students to critique structures of power and oppression. It is rooted in critical theory, which involves becoming aware of and questioning the societal status quo

Eurocentric

focusing on European culture or history to the exclusion of a wider view of the world

Formal curriculum

designed as a framework for instructional planning in schools that outlines broad goals and strategies to reach them. The foundations of the formal curriculum are based on publicly valued intellectual, social, cultural, political, and economic funds of knowledge.

Hegemonic

Hegemonic power works by consent, not coercion caused by force or violence; thus it is not questioned. Hegemony supports the status quo and solidifies the idea that “how it is” represents “how it should be.” Therefore, hegemonic power becomes “common sense” and normalized within a society, facilitating compliance.

Identity categories

are usually defined by some physical, social, and mental characteristics of individuals. Examples of social identity categories are race/ethnicity, gender, social class/socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, (dis)abilities, and religion/religious beliefs.

Intersectionality

the interconnected nature of social categorizations such

as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group

Inveterate

having a particular habit, activity, or interest that is long-established and unlikely to change

Marginalized

to relegate to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group

Master narrative

culturally shared stories that guide thoughts, beliefs, values, and behaviors

NS Bias Evaluation Instrument

a six-page document produced by the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. The section on Assessment Criteria provides a series of analytical questions regarding several types of bias so that evaluators may identify the various aspects of bias present in a classroom resource/text and provide for ways in which teachers and students might address these issues within the classroom:
<https://studentservices.ednet.ns.ca/sites/default/files/>

Bias%20Evaluation%20Instrument%20%2809092015%29.pdf

Oppression

the combination of prejudice and institutional power which creates a system that discriminates against some groups (often called “subordinate groups”) and benefits other groups (often called “dominant groups”)

Othring

a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities

Pedagogy

a term that refers to the method of how teachers teach, in theory and in practice

Privileged

a special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group

Reservation system

Under the Indian Act (1876), the Canadian government

defined a reserve as land that has been set aside (not apart) by the government for the use and benefit of an Indian band. Reserve land is still classified as federal land, and First Nations do not have title to reserve land. Reserves were often created on less valuable land and sometimes located outside the traditional territory of the particular First Nation.

Residential schooling system

The residential school system officially operated within Canada from the 1880s until 1996. The system forcibly separated Indigenous children from their families for extended periods of time and forbade them from acknowledging their Indigenous heritage and culture or to speak their own languages.

Social Identity Theory

aims to specify and predict the circumstances under which individuals think of themselves as individuals or as group members

Social identity/ies

is a person's sense of who they are based on their group membership(s)

Social justice framework

social justice-oriented approaches in education refer to standpoints and scholarly traditions that actively address the dynamics of oppression, privilege, and isms, recognizing that society is the product of historically rooted, institutionally sanctioned stratification along socially constructed group lines that include race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ability

Systemic inequities

historical and current policies, practices, and laws that create unfair/unjust differences between groups (by race, gender, etc.) across sectors of life, such as healthcare, education, and housing

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APPENDIX

Identity

IDENTITY CATEGORY	MINE/MY IDENTITY	MORE/ MOST PRIVILEGED	LESS PRIVILEGED
RACE			
CULTURE			
ETHNICITY			
SEX			
GENDER			
SOCIAL CLASS: status accorded to employment/ occupation			
SOCIAL CLASS: status accorded to income			
SOCIAL CLASS: status accorded to manners, values, norms of behaviour			
RELIGION			
AGE			
ABILITY: physical			
ABILITY: cognitive/ intellectual			

ABILITY: mental health			
SEXUAL ORIENTATION			
REGION/ COUNTRY OF ORIGIN			
AGE			
ANYTHING MISSING FROM THIS LIST			

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Valda Leighteizer, PhD, teaches in the Education Faculty of Mount Saint Vincent University. She has been working with pre-service and classroom teachers for more than twenty-five years. Her teaching and research areas include: curriculum theories, critical curriculum practices, and the intersectionalities of social identities with one another and how they impact the teaching and learning processes in schooling. She works with a critical and feminist lens.

Sonya Singer, MAEd., MEd., was a teacher and English department head for thirty-one years in the Nova Scotia public school system. Since her retirement, she has held faculty positions at Mount Saint Vincent University, Acadia University, and Cape Breton University, where she has most recently served as a curriculum development consultant and part-time instructor in the Bachelor of Education program. She has a particular interest in teaching for social justice and L'nu education.

COVER ART ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

“Untitled” – Val Chiasson, 2019

