

50 Years of Curriculum Studies and Policy: A Personal & Political Review

Andy Hargreaves

Boston College

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Introduction

This chapter is an account of how the field of curriculum studies became detached from the fate of the world. It describes how curriculum studies originally addressed how the official and hidden curriculum were constituted by historical and political forces of nationalism, elitism and, to a lesser extent, colonialism, that were also buttressed by the professional self-interests of teacher subject communities. It then points to how curriculum theory tragically aligned itself with philosophical movements of postmodernism and identity essentialism that abandoned these sociological and historical foundations in favour of claims that power was diffuse and intangible rather than concentrated and substantial, that metanarratives about real world changes were dominant impositions or did not exist, and that the fragmented intersections of diverse forms of marginalization (that excluded gross economic inequalities), were what mattered now.

All this occurred at a time of a convergence between two movements. On the one hand, there was and still is a neo-liberal narrowing of the curriculum to technocratic and over-tested preoccupations with securing measurable achievement gains in literacy and numeracy that are undergirded by exaggerated faith in evidence-based “sciences” of instruction, improvement, and explicit teaching. On the other hand, there are cruel, punitive, and exclusionary metanarratives of populism that, from the 1980s, have embarked on long marches to nationalize the official and everyday curriculum with content that celebrates the triumph of controlling and conquering elites to the detriment of the experience of disadvantaged, marginalized and oppressed groups around the world.

This chapter documents the impact of these movements and the efforts of myself and others to combat them through the eyes of my own experience and writing as a researcher, school collaborator, and government policy adviser who advances broad excellence, equity, inclusion, wellbeing, democracy, and human rights through shared leadership in professionally run systems.

The Politics of the Subject-based Curriculum

From the moment I started out as an academic in the mid 1970s, much of my focus, and most of my citations, have been concerned with teaching, teachers’ work, and teacher cultures. This work began with an interest in progressive pedagogies, or what British

curriculum theorist, Basil Bernstein (1975), called *invisible pedagogies*. I was curious as to whether progressivism and student autonomy was a form of liberation for the marginalized in line with the thinking of Paulo Freire (1970), or whether it operated as a disguised form of selection and control in schools where students from dominant cultures could read their teachers' subtle cues and make the "right" choices whereas working class students could not (Hargreaves, 1977).

In terms of the contemporary work of Santiago Rincón-Gallardo (2019), these questions still exercise me. How do we liberate learning by bringing the curriculum closer to students and their cultures, rather than sticking with what Freire called a banking model of education in which external and often alien knowledge is deposited in the heads of children? And, in line with the work of US scholars Jal Mehta and Sara Fine (2019), how can we embrace more interdisciplinary, student-centred, project-based learning that genuinely achieves this collective end through transformations of the core curriculum, rather than making creative projects and choices available only as boutique options for a privileged few, in a tiny number of outlier schools, or as mere adjuncts to the core curriculum?

One of the main obstacles to interdisciplinary innovations and to the goal of liberating learning in general is the historic existence and imposition of a curriculum organized around subject disciplines. From the start of the 1970s to the middle of the 80s, there was a robust tradition of work in the history and sociology of the school curriculum that identified and explained the impediments that the histories, cultures, and identities of school subjects posed to positive and inclusive curriculum change.

The tradition originated in the UK with a group of sociologists at the London Institute of Education. In a foundational paper "*On the Classification and Framing of Educational Knowledge*", in 1971, Basil Bernstein (1971) argued that the curriculum can be understood as being strongly or weakly classified in terms of how the contents of the curriculum are separated from one another; of whether the boundaries between these contents are clear or blurred. An integrated curriculum where there is a lot of project-based or play-based learning has blurred boundaries. A traditional curriculum organized around separate school subjects has clear or firm boundaries. In probably his most quoted sentence, Bernstein said this:

How a society selects, classifies, distributes, transmits, and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public, reflects both the distribution of power and the principles of social control. (Bernstein 1975: 85)

If subjects and subject contents are strongly delineated, Bernstein argued, this supports and perpetuates existing structures of power and control in society. This is because success in the curriculum depends on mastering traditional knowledge that is rather abstract and disconnected from students' own everyday lives. Integrated or interdisciplinary learning, by contrast, blurs the differences between subjects, threatens the interests of those in power who exert control, and leads to "a disturbance of existing authority structures". "Any attempt to weaken or change" boundaries between subjects or between teachers and children, Bernstein argued, threatens people's identities and the privileged gateways to success that traditional knowledge and examinations provide.

The editor of the same book in which Bernstein's paper first appeared, Michael F.D. Young (1971), argued that the subject-based secondary school curriculum, mainly presented students with what he called high-status knowledge - knowledge that was abstract, decontextualized, and unrelated to everyday life (Young 1973). This subject-based curriculum served the interests of more privileged families whose children were prepared to struggle through and succeed in a curriculum that often had no immediate connection to their own experience. It was a gateway to their success but also a drawbridge that slammed shut in the face of working-class students who were more likely to succeed in a curriculum only if it was less abstract, and more connected to the immediate context of their experience. This low status knowledge was made available only in low status subjects that did not provide clear pathways to universities and to success in later life.

Many years later, University of Texas at Austin professor, Allison Skerrett (2009), added a racial dimension to this analysis when she found that in both the US and Canada, the English curriculum became more abstract, "white" and Euro-colonial in honors classes and the closer that students were to entering college, while it only became more related to students' everyday lives in classes for lower track or newly immigrated students in order to maintain their motivation.

Picking up on the work of British sociologists of curriculum, in the late 1970s, the American curriculum theorist, Michael Apple (1979) set out an explicitly Marxist approach

to analyzing why the curriculum took the forms it did and what the consequences were for educational and social class inequality. The school curriculum is not “a neutral assemblage of knowledge”, Apple (1993) argued some years later. “It is a political and cultural product.” Schools reproduce social inequalities, he went on, “because the curriculum represents the interests of those who have power.” (p 222)

Whenever efforts at creating a more integrated curriculum move in from the margins to the core, or when curriculum knowledge that includes more experience-based subjects of study starts to expand from being a motivational measure for non-academic students to all students, concerted political efforts are then made to claw the curriculum back to a more classical stance.

This happened in the UK in 1904 after the expansion of vocational studies through what were known as Higher Grade Schools had started to create university pathways for working class students (Goodson, 1995). The government’s Board of Education reacted by redefining and reinstalling a conventional subject-based curriculum that comprised English, Mathematics, Science, a Foreign Language (typically French or German), History and Geography, Drawing, Manual Work (for boys) and Domestic Subjects (for girls), Physical Training, and Religious Instruction.

Twelve years earlier, in the US, reactions to expansions of secondary education that was increasing and diversifying who was going to college, led to the establishment of an even more restrictive High School Curriculum by a group that was mainly comprised of professors from elite universities. It was known as The Committee of Ten. In addition to a subject list that closely resembled that of the 1904 Regulations, the committee also insisted that Classical Languages (Latin and Greek) should form part of a common curriculum taken by all students. What was ostensibly egalitarian in the sense that it provided all students with the same curricular experience, was also divisive because the required curriculum was unfamiliar to and detached from the experiences of working-class students (Goodson, 1995, Hamilton 1989).

Fast forward to the 1980s and the growth of progressive, egalitarian, and innovative educational movements in the US and UK, was halted and followed by political counter moves to re-install a common core curriculum in the US, and a National Curriculum in England. In the US, the psychological scholarship of Stanford Professor Lee Shulman (1987)

led to a typology of forms of knowledge that underpinned a traditional idea of what would count as Common Core Standards. Two out of the three forms of knowledge that Shulman, in his intellectually and politically influential work, said that teachers must know and be able to do, were what he called *content knowledge* (the knowledge of one's subject or discipline) and *pedagogical content knowledge* (the knowledge of how to teach a particular subject).

Unlike the US, England didn't typically use research knowledge and findings to legitimize its educational decisions. Instead, its National Curriculum, introduced by Margaret Thatcher's government in 1988, turned to tradition, common-sense and political preference for justification. The new curriculum had an uncanny resemblance to both the 1904 regulations and the decisions of the Committee of Ten. The three core subjects of the National Curriculum were mathematics, English, and science. Other additional "foundation" subjects included history, geography, a modern language, creative arts, physical education and, with one concession to innovation, technology (Hargreaves, 1989). Subjects of a practical, personal, or social nature were cast to the margins. In my own case, a book that I published with five secondary teachers titled *Personal and Social Education: Choices and Challenges*, quickly sold 2000 copies on its release in early 1988, and then sold virtually no copies at all after the National Curriculum was introduced later in the year (Hargreaves, Baglin, Henderson, Leeson & Tossell, 1988). As one government official was quoted as saying, there would be no space or time for "clutter such as peace studies" (*Times Educational Supplement*, August 7, 1987 – quoted in Hargreaves, 1989, p 64).

In 1989, I wrote my first and only book on curriculum: *Curriculum and Assessment Reform* (Hargreaves, 1989). It was an effort to make sense of the massive changes that were taking place in government curriculum policy in England and elsewhere. I turned to the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas (1976) to provide an explanation, or metanarrative, of the social forces that were leading to shifts in the education of whole nations of young people. Habermas described three successive forms of crisis that faced advanced capitalist societies.

First was an *economic crisis* as capitalism reached limits in its ability to accumulate profit by existing means. In education, this crisis could be seen in cutbacks to funding for

public education and state expenditure in general, and in the onset of a new discourse and apparatus of accountability to regulate allocation of public funds.

Second was a *crisis of legitimation* or belief. Here, as public finances shrank, opportunities disappeared and inequalities increased, there was a collapse in the credibility of the state. Its actions and the people who performed them lost their legitimacy. So, through shaping the minds of the young, as the generations of the future, the curriculum was charged with instilling common values that aligned with dominant perspectives, and with restoring belief in national traditions and identity.

Last, was a *crisis of motivation*. With the loss of jobs and opportunity, how could people be motivated to work hard and comply with the requirements of the state? For a brief period in the mid 1980s, just before the imposition of England's national curriculum, I noted, there were extensive efforts to introduce innovations in alternative assessments for non-academic students, such as self-assessment and portfolio assessments, but these were quashed as soon as the English National Curriculum was installed.

To conclude, during this first onset of authoritarian populism and its appeal to national interests and identity, there was a clear metanarrative of imposed curriculum change that disadvantaged and marginalized students from working class backgrounds. As at earlier points in history, when the existing order of dominant interests was threatened by progressive educational developments and the blurring of subject content and categories, a traditional and elitist curriculum was redefined and reinforced. These political efforts were not achieved by governments alone, though. Ironically, they were assisted by a significant slice of the teaching profession itself.

The Professionalization of Subject Teaching

For more than a century, the politics of the curriculum has been buttressed by the professionalization of the curriculum and particularly of school subjects. Sociologists of the professions claimed that teaching did not meet the criteria for being a full profession. It was, Amitai Etzioni (1969) said, at best a semi-profession. Compared to other professions, teachers lacked claims to having a monopoly of specialized knowledge that was inaccessible to the wider public. Philip Jackson (1968), among others, pointed to the fact

that teachers had a weak technical vocabulary that did not set them apart from everyday citizens.

Subject teachers in secondary schools have countered these trends by creating movements and cultures that advance their status in relation to the public, and, relatively, in relation to each other. They have done this by making claims about the highly specialized character of their subject matter knowledge or discipline. British educational philosophers and US educational psychologists made strong assertions about the inherent characteristics of subject disciplines that separate them from everyday knowledge and from each other, and that call for different subjects to be taught in distinctive ways that are faithful to and mindful of the nature of these disciplines.

In the 1980s and 90s, however, sociologists and historians of school subjects grounded the more general theories of Bernstein, Young and Apple, in empirical studies of how school subjects like geography, history, science, mathematics, English and environmental studies sought to define themselves over time in ways that advanced their own status and interests. Herb Kliebard (1986), John Goodlad (1984), and Barry Franklin (1986) in the US, as well as Bruce Curtis (1988) in Canada all addressed these issues. But much of the foundational work on the history and sociology of school subjects was laid and led in the UK by two young sociologists at the University of Sussex, Ivor Goodson, and Stephen Ball (Goodson and Ball, 1985).

Goodson's PhD thesis and subsequent publications documented how geography evolved as a school subject against opposition from more established disciplines like geology (Goodson, 1983). It improved its status over time by becoming increasingly abstract and mathematical, to the point where, in the 1970s, one of its leading institutions, the University of Sheffield's geography department, had become so mathematically abstract and detached from everyday issues that I abandoned it for sociology, even though I had won my school's geography prize. Ironically, Goodson continued, after attaining high status for their subject, university geographers then resisted the equivalent efforts of advocates of environmental studies to establish their emergent subject as a valid discipline, on the grounds that, compared to geography, it was not a distinct and defensible subject at all.

Sociologists and historians of curriculum were mainly agnostic about whether, or not, distinct disciplines were real in a philosophical sense. They were more focused on how

status battles were conducted on behalf of some subjects and against others, about the criteria that were used to increase subject status – making subject knowledge more abstract and unrelated to everyday knowledge – and about debates and disputes within subjects such as English (skills vs literature, for example), as well as between them (Goodson and Ball, 1985). This sociological tradition also enabled scholars to point to divisive forces in the definition and imposition of school subjects that were imposed by Empires on their colonies (Willinsky, 1998).

Subjects were not just disciplines. They were also communities. Students were schooled in them and then recruited to universities where they further developed their subject identities that they carried with them out into the world, including back into teaching. Subject histories, subject cultures and subject communities helped to consolidate the traditional subject based curriculum while some governments were politically re-imposing it to protect national and cultural identity. It was an unholy alliance between the professionalization and the politicization of the curriculum.

The Struggle for Innovation and Curriculum Integration

Elsewhere, in systems not yet set on establishing top-down curriculum control, traditional subject communities and identities were one of the key reasons why their efforts at curriculum integration usually unravelled. In the early to mid 1990s, for example, I worked with the only socialist government in the history of Ontario, Canada, to introduce an integrated, outcomes-based curriculum for students in the middle years, at the start of adolescence (Hargreaves and Earl, 1990). When we evaluated the government's pilot projects, we found that the results were very mixed (Hargreaves, Leithwood, Gerin-Lajoie, Cousins & Thiessen, 1993). Difficulties with implementation were widespread. In addition to problems of time and workload that accompany most efforts to introduce innovations, teachers judged integration efforts to be successful only when they collaborated to agree on what the learning outcomes running across disciplines meant in practice. On their own, though, teachers found that the written outcomes were frustratingly vague. Schools also often exempted mathematics and foreign languages from the integrated curriculum on the grounds that the importance and inherent structure of these subjects required that they be

taught separately (Hargreaves, Earl, Moore & Manning, 2001; Hargreaves & Moore, 1999; 2000).

In the US, by comparison, a group of researchers at Stanford University adapted the prior British work on the sociology of school subjects not to question subject identities, but to reinforce them. They distinguished strong from weak professional subject communities to support a position which claimed that stronger subject departments with collaborative agreement about content and pedagogy led to higher standards (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Their streams of funding helped them undergird the standards-based reform movement in the US which itself reaffirmed the status of subjects and subject departments in the American curriculum. By contrast, in Ontario, Canada, my own research team documented how balkanized and competitive relationships between high school communities organized around subjects undercut pilot project efforts at curriculum integration and, by implication, the Bernstein-like goals of equity and inclusion that integration and the flattening of the status hierarchy of subject knowledge were meant to help accomplish (Hargreaves & MacMillan, 1995).

Perhaps all this explains why, right up to today, in secondary schools, curriculum innovation takes place as an intermission during the regular curriculum in the form of a special project, why it occurs on the curriculum periphery after school or on a Friday morning or afternoon, or why it is confined to a few outlier schools that gather like-minded, creative and sometimes rebellious teachers together in one location, where they can inspire other schools that are interested, and where they do no harm to the majority of schools and high school teachers that are not.

Postmodern Paradoxes

Apart from the research on subject communities that faded in influence from the mid 1990s, curriculum theory turned away from sociological critiques of the contribution of social class inequalities to focus instead on the vicissitudes of educators' experiences of the everyday curriculum. The advent of postmodernism and reconceptualism led to preoccupations in curriculum theory with a wider array of marginalized groups, beyond and mostly instead of ones that were marginalized by wealth inequality. Curriculum theory now focused more on how multiple categories of students – female, queer, racially

marginalized, and so on - were oppressed or liberated by different kinds of subjective curricular experiences, oppressions, and microaggressions in schools. It also explored the sense that teachers made of the curriculum they were teaching often through philosophical speculation or through very small-scale case studies. While these movements usefully widened the scope of concerns of inequality beyond social class parameters in curriculum theory, the forms and discourses of this theoretical turn would eventually have catastrophic strategic consequences as the esoteric and existential academic expressions and interests of educational theory began to seep into and influence public policy and political strategy.

Through the work of figures like Bill Pinar (1994), Madeleine Grumet (1998), and Ted Aoki (Pinar & Irwin, 1992), curriculum became a fluid and personal experience of meaning and creation that had racial, gendered, and other identity implications but ignored the importance of economic inequality as a basic structuring force of curriculum experience. Interestingly, while sociologists of curriculum like Michael Apple, Ivor Goodson, and, to some extent, myself (Hargreaves, 2020c), have been explicit about our positionality in terms of social class origins, I have been unable to trace the occupations of the parents of any of the reconceptualists, except for Ted Aoki, whose parents were teachers in Japan. Perhaps it is easier to pin hopes for insight and change on personal existentialism if theorists' own upbringings have not been economically precarious.

If the curriculum was personal to the reconceptualists, to postmodernists like William Doll (1993), it was complex, chaotic, and unknowable. Unifying metanarratives of curriculum or any other phenomena were oppressive Western, male, colonial impositions of knowledge and discourse. Inspired by pragmatist philosophers such as Richard Rorty (1979), and by selected aspects of the theories of Michael Foucault (1977) on discourse and power, postmodernists took a position on the importance of power which argued that it was ubiquitous rather than concentrated in the interests and relationships of any one group.

In 1994, when these two converging forces were shaping curriculum theory and educational theory in a profound way, I anticipated the problems to come by going against the theoretical tide. In *Changing Teachers, Changing Times* (Hargreaves, 1994), subtitled *Teachers' Work and Culture in the Postmodern Age* (which is the main title in the Spanish translation), I argued that the theoretical prominence of postmodernism in social theory,

education, art, and culture, was an effect of a substantive, knowable, metanarrative that the Marxist geographer, David Harvey (1994), called the social condition of postmodernity.

Postmodernity represented a real phase in the development of advanced capitalist economies. These were becoming characterized by the flexible globalization of economic production (what others termed neo-liberalism), and by how digital technologies were accelerating everyone's sense of time and compressing their experience of space. As the Catalan sociologist Manuel Castells (1998) would also later argue, Harvey indicated how the structural and cultural changes brought about by postmodernity reduced the importance of traditional identities of nation, religion, and, of course, social class, and replaced them with other, more fragmented constellations of identities such as disability, gender identity, race, ethnicity, colonization, language, and so forth.

In the middle of all this, I participated in an invitational international seminar at Rutgers University. One fellow participant, who, in education, was becoming a leading Foucault aficionado (and who also, to my knowledge, has not foregrounded his family origins), started to argue that there was no substantive, agreed upon reality, that power was everywhere and nowhere, and that all that truly existed was words and discourse. At this point, I leaned across the table and spoke about my working class, widowed mother who was approaching her 80s. For more than two years, she had been pushing to get a new door on her social housing apartment to replace one that let in the cold and that forced her to choose whether to turn up her heating, or to use her meagre resources for other necessities. But under the authoritarian populist government of Margaret Thatcher, local municipalities had run out of funds. My mother's door, I insisted, was not in her discursive imagination. And the unwillingness to replace it was a material problem of Thatcherite capitalism, not a discursive one of words, symbols, and language.

Reconceptualism was about curriculum as the *construction* of personal or interpersonal meaning. Postmodernism was about the *deconstruction* of oppressive or dominant meanings. Unlike their sociological predecessors, neither philosophical movement addressed the dynamics of systemic economic inequalities as they were expressed through the curriculum and elsewhere on people's opportunities and experience. But postmodernism had not done with the world, and the spread of its intellectual

preoccupations through and beyond universities would have tragic consequences for curriculum policies and global politics in years to come.

The Curriculum of Neo-Liberalism

In the 1990s, while curriculum theory continued to move in existential and postmodern directions that embraced complexity and personal experience, the curriculum itself was being massively restructured in ways that aligned with the technocratic emphases of neo-liberalism. The No Child Left Behind strategy of the US, England's national Literacy and Numeracy strategy, and Ontario's less heavyweight version of its English counterpart, all turned to large-scale top-down reforms of standardized varieties. Richard Elmore (1995) in the US, Michael Barber (2001) in the UK (adviser to Prime Minister Tony Blair), and Michael Fullan (2000) in Canada (adviser to the Premier of Ontario), all signed up to becoming thought leaders behind these large-scale moves to raise standards and increase equity.

These influential models of large-scale neo-liberal reform imposed a system based on common standards (that quickly turned into standardization), high stakes testing, increased competition between schools (that was less explicit in Ontario), and the reduction of equity concerns to the technical measurement of achievement gaps in basic skills of literacy and mathematics. These intra-national moves towards top-down reform and high stakes accountability were quickly followed, internationally, by the application of the first PISA tests by the OECD in 2002 which added competition between societies to competition in schools. In 2001, I described this as a New Orthodoxy (Hargreaves, Earl, Moore, & Manning, 2001). Pasi Sahlberg (2011), in his ground-breaking account of how high performing Finland was based on the very opposite of testing, standardization and competition, gave the neo-liberal education movement a more memorable acronym of GERM, for *Global Education Reform Movement*.

Equity, of course, is not equivalent to sameness. And high stakes testing is not the most effective method for assessing or developing students' knowledge. The neo-liberal movement in curriculum reform was thus doomed to disappointment, as the research of my colleagues and I in all three countries documented.

In a study funded by the Spencer Foundation, a team led by Ivor Goodson and I was able to see the early effects of standards-based reform and the introduction of competency-based exams in three high schools in New York State (Baker and Foote, 2006; Hargreaves, 2003; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006). Teachers of English and social studies became demoralized when they could no longer devise a curriculum that engaged their diverse students culturally. Teachers in another school that used to be the Jewel in the Crown of its district also lost motivation when its highest achieving students were attracted to a newly established magnet school and when large numbers of students with special needs were bused in from other schools in the district to replace them. The school then became a hotbed of union activism and teacher resistance. Meanwhile, in the magnet school itself, teachers of students with special needs who were not able to contribute to the school's reputation for high performance in test scores and who complained that the school wasn't serving their students, were consigned to the school's basement.

In Ontario, in a study involving 10 school districts I will describe shortly, although the Ontario reforms registered steady achievement gains and narrowed some achievement gaps, this was at considerable cost. For example, we witnessed clear examples, including on charts posted on staffroom walls, where schools adopted a strategy that Booher-Jennings (2005) labelled focusing on "bubble kids". In their quest to increase the numbers of tested students scoring at Level 4 proficiency, teachers were urged to concentrate in a triage-like way, on changes that could quickly raise performance from a 3 to a 4. When educators asked about what they should do to help struggling students at Level 2, they were told to "forget about the 2s"! We also discovered that when teachers got involved in an innovation programme developed by the teacher unions in collaboration with the government, they avoided innovating in the grades that were the focus of the testing, and even in the years or grades before (Hargreaves, 2020b).

Fullan (2025) and Elmore (The Schoolhouse302, 2021) subsequently recanted their beliefs in the effectiveness of large-scale standardized reform in complex societies, but in England, Sir Michael Barber has not. Indeed, Barber (2007) has created a whole armoury of "deliverology" to specify, deliver and measure government reforms in education and beyond, around the world. Early critiques of the Barber reforms in Literacy and Numeracy pointed to now familiar impacts of the negative effects of targets and testing such as

teaching to the test, narrowing the curriculum, and pushing out students who might drag down the scores (Bird, Cox, Farewell, Goldstein, Holt & Smith. 2005; Tymms & Merrell, 2007).

In response to these criticisms, the government in England expanded its educational change brief to include innovation and transformation. Dennis Shirley and I were invited to undertake an evaluation of one resulting initiative: *Raising Achievement, Transforming Learning (RATL)* (Hargreaves, Shirley, Evans, Stone-Johnson & Riseman, 2006). The project took 300 underperforming schools, networked them with each other and with partners who could help them, provided inspirational input from thought leaders, and collected a list of practical short-term improvement strategies like having students eat bananas and drink more water on test taking days, and training older students to become coaches on test taking strategies for their younger peers. Our evaluation found that in terms of examination scores, two thirds of the schools improved their examination results at double the rate of the national average. However, the pressures for measurable short-term improvement in this environment of competition and accountability created a culture of presentism which meant that little or no attention was given to the parallel longer-term agenda of innovation and transformation (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009b).

Neo-liberal curriculum reform was a massive movement of restructuring that did little to raise achievement or improve equity, and when it did so, this came at the cost of deflecting attention from other purposes, like engagement and inclusion. Indeed, in our later book on *Five Paths of Student Engagement*, Dennis Shirley and I named high stakes testing as the archenemy of student engagement (Shirley & Hargreaves, 2021). Finnish education expert, Pasi Sahlberg (2021), points out that since its introduction in 2002, the OECD's annual PISA test has seen test results declining rather than improving. There were critics of this deliberately constructed metanarrative of testing such as measurement experts Richard Rothstein (2014) and Henry Braun (2005) in the US, but, confronted by a standardized curriculum that flew in the face of student diversity, curriculum theory remained almost silent.

The dynamics of neo-liberalism and its influence on public education are by no means done with. After disruptions incurred by the COVID-19 pandemic, governments from Australia to Canada, from the US to the UK, are now performing their ability to control the

educational agenda by turning back to the classic neo-liberal model of improving basic literacy and mathematics skills in a technocratic way through measures that are variously known as explicit teaching and the science of reading (Ravitch, 2020). This narrow, common curriculum, unrelated to students' diverse engagements with everyday life, is once again using curriculum reform to generate technical improvements, while offering little to increase broader equity and inclusion. It is time for curriculum theory to take a stand on this development.

Curriculum, Inclusion, and Identity

Alongside neo-liberal reforms in curriculum policy, another movement has evolved out of postmodernism – the growth of identity politics in education. In his 2023 book, *The Identity Trap*, Yascha Mounk (2023) explains how there are two converging reasons why rancorous disputes about identity politics have spread throughout society, especially in schools and universities.

The first factor is the *legacy of postmodernism*. Postmodernism challenges and deconstructs claims to universal or common truths or forms of reason as being expressions of dominant discourses of privilege that oppress others. This means that claims about subject knowledge, curriculum status, research evidence, and the divisions that are deliberately and sometimes intentionally perpetrated through the school curriculum are inaccessible to agreed truths.

A second factor is what Mounk calls *identity essentialism*. In some ways, this seems like the antithesis of postmodernism. Under essentialism, because of its positionality, each oppressed and indeed non-oppressed group has experiences and forms of knowledge that are unknowable outside its own group identity. Men cannot truly understand women, members of racial groups cannot understand those of different ethnicities or colours, and so on. There is no generic empathy, no universal claim to knowledge and truth, no means of confirming or disconfirming theories and claims grounded in other people's experience. Identities are incommensurable. All that can be done, practically, is to advocate for each oppressed identity in its own terms, and to make aggregations or coalitions of identity groups in political campaigns (white females over 40, young Black men, etc), or in areas of curriculum focus – Black History month, Asian Heritage week, STEM for girls, curriculum

texts about young people with different aspects of neurodiversity, culturally responsive teaching towards one identity or another, and so on.

Together, the convergence of these apparent opposites - postmodernism and identity essentialism - leads to divisive identity politics, Mounk argues. In educational terms, traditional, dominant, or Eurocentric knowledge is canceled in favour of culturally diverse and inclusive content. But these efforts to make the curriculum more responsive and inclusive, also lead to it becoming more fragmented. Moreover, while the intention is for holders of some identities to feel more included, bearers of other identities start to feel neither heard nor seen – something I will return to in the next section. Selective inclusion creates exclusion, which, in turn, breeds resentment (Hochschild, 2024). This convergence of essentialism and postmodern relativism in the curriculum certainly does not embrace the advocacy of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (Hoare & Nowell-Smith, 1971; Entwistle, 1979) or of Michael F.D. Young in his much later work with colleagues, that children from marginalized groups should experience and be exposed to dominant and disciplined knowledge so they can be empowered by it, engage with it, and engage with its holders critically (Young, Lambert, Roberts & Roberts, 2014).

In many respects, though, identity politics emerged in a much more innocent and idealistic context than the one described by Mounk – that of inclusion. From 2009, my Boston College colleagues Henry Braun, then, later, Dennis Shirley undertook two long periods of collaborating with a representative sample of 10 of Ontario's 72 school districts, in Canada (Hargreaves, Braun, Hughes, Chapman, L, Lam, Lee, Morton, Sallis, Steiner & Welch, 2012; Hargreaves, Shirley, Wangia, Bacon & D'Angelo, 2018). We joined with this Consortium of Ten to analyze and advance the agenda for inclusion that districts had been asked to move forward by the province's Ministry of Education.

Inclusion at this time was a more sophisticated way of thinking about how to support children with special educational needs. It was about shifting from an emphasis on legally and psychologically identifying individual children with exceptionalities and providing interventions and supports for them, to creating environments where collaborative teams of teachers used differentiated pedagogy with the assistance of technological supports that could enable all students to succeed.

From 2014, under a new premier, Kathleen Wynne, for whom I became an education adviser, the province, and, therefore, the 10 districts, deepened the approach to inclusion, equity, and well-being. In the province's 2014 policy statement, *excellence* was defined broadly beyond literacy and mathematics to make the school "a compelling, innovative and engaging place to learn for all students." (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). *Equity* was about "inclusivity and respect," "regardless of ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or other factors." *Well-being* would promote "a positive sense of self and belonging" to develop the "whole child." Inclusion and identity were central to attaining equity and excellence.

Working with a diverse team of graduate students, we undertook case studies of each of these districts and held twice-yearly retreats with them in Toronto. We followed the educators' interests as they addressed student learning and engagement (Shirley & Hargreaves, 2021), then well-being (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2022), and finally, identity (Shirley & Hargreaves, 2024).

For the province, for the school districts, and for our team, therefore, it's important to remember that identity issues emerged in a positive moment of using inclusion to achieve equity. Identity was a way of operationalizing the basic belief that it was hard to succeed in school if you did not see yourself in its curriculum. In the earlier periods of our work, two very important principles became evident in our collaborative work with the districts.

First was the transformational idea, named by the districts themselves, that *what is essential for some students is often good for all of them*. This principle doesn't use identity to divide or fragment people, or to set groups against one another. It uses identity as a force for inclusion and unification. Writing several years later, we listed some examples of how this strategy did and could work in our book on *The Age of Identity* (Shirley & Hargreaves, 2023) These are presented again in adapted form.

- *All* students, not just those with special educational needs, will be more successful when every student is involved in developing and writing their own personalized learning plan or pathway, when they have the skills and opportunity to advocate for

the supports and approaches that help them learn best, and when they can and do use digital technologies to access, express, and enhance what they know.

- *All* students, not just those of Indigenous heritage, will benefit from learning outdoors, sustainably, in nature; from being in classrooms that are not constructed like metal or concrete boxes; and from storytelling and the arts becoming a more explicit part of the curriculum.
- *All* students, not just those who speak a minority language or come from a minoritized culture, will prosper when their identities and who they will develop into as human beings are accorded as much priority as gains and outcomes in measured student achievement.
- *All* students, not just those with LGBTQ+ identities, will flourish in a school environment from which bullying and stigmatization have been excised, and that becomes a safe space in which they can thrive.
- *All* students will benefit from welcoming and engaging with students from other cultures and with other identities and from feeling welcomed themselves, just like someone from another country or culture, or when they too change classes, schools, or the towns and cities where their parents or other caregivers choose to live.

The curriculum principle of *Essential for Some Good for All* is the very opposite of postmodern and essentialist thinking. It flies in the face of curriculum essentialism, and aspects of critical race theory, in which groups are ineffable to and incommensurable with one another. Instead of fragmenting groups, topics and areas of focus, the curriculum seeks to include and unite them. For the province, for the school districts, and for our team, therefore, identity issues emerged in a positive moment of using inclusion to achieve equity and belonging.

The second evolving principle and set of practices was that of realizing that identities are multiple and complicated, not singular, and that we require *holistic strategies* to address them. Identities are not merely items to be listed, or boxes to be ticked. Kwame Anthony Appiah (2018) points out that identity is an activity or process, not a thing. My University of Ottawa colleague, Vice Provost for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, Awad Ibrahim (in press) cuts to the chase. EDI (DEI elsewhere), he insists, is not an office, or a

meeting, or a certificate of completed training hanging on the wall. It is a culture in which courageous conversations about all the issues that EDI/DEI encompasses can be had.

More and more people in the three countries in which I have lived and worked, including all five of my grandchildren, are mixed race, yet there is almost no curriculum content or curriculum text which embraces the true diversity of who they are. As Punjabi-British, mixed-race actor, Jassa Ahluwalia (2024), points out in his exploration of the complexity of his own identity in terms of race, nationality, gender identity, language, and social class, we need to affirm that complex identities are *Both, Not Half*. One way to achieve this in the curriculum is by emulating how some of the 10 districts in our project took up a long-standing philosophy of concentrating as a *whole school on the whole child*, together, as a community, rather than responding to bits and pieces of them as distinct identity categories (see also, Slade 2023).

One such strategy was to place a photo of a child struggling with some aspect of their learning (not necessarily one that had been formally identified in special education terms) in the centre of a table, then involving everyone who knows that child to contribute to the discussion – current teachers, former teachers, learning support teachers, educational assistants, people who taught the child the previous year, administrative staff, and so on.

Essentialists have a point in recognizing that no individual can fully understand another. Philosophically, the phenomenologist Alfred Schutz (1967) grasped this a century ago. To some degree, we are all ultimately a mystery to each other. Even after 50+ years of marriage, my wife, Pauline, and I are still discovering new things about one other. Classroom relationships between one teacher who is responsible for many children magnify these inalienable elements of ignorance and surprise. None of us can know everything about everyone. But as a Hong Kong Principal remarked when we were conducting a cross national study of exemplary school collaboration in 2017, “No-one is perfect. But the team can be” (Hargreaves & O’Connor, 2018). It takes a whole team to know the whole child.

Recasting the Curriculum of Identity

By the time Dennis Shirley and I came to write up our work with the districts on identity, following our preceding books that had focused on student engagement and wellbeing, the political climate was changing rapidly. During the COVID-19 pandemic, people in many countries got agitated about masks and vaccinations, and about government elites telling them what to do. This was followed by *moral panics* - a term invented by British sociologist Stan Cohen (1972) - about transgender access to toilets and sports in schools and elsewhere, about the rights to safe spaces of women who regard biological sex as part of the definition of gender, about whether all white people are inherently racist and practise systemic racism in everything they think and do, about whether alleged tides of immigrants are taking over people's countries and schools, about whether national identity should be represented in the curriculum as a source of collective pride or as the scourge of divisive colonialism, and about the outrageous global myth that teachers have been putting out trays of cat litter for children who self-identify as cats (Montpetit & Ward, 2022).

Through our own project work, we had learned and read a lot about identity, but as two straight white men about to compose a book on the subject, it was like a firework had been placed in our hands and we were about to light our own blue touch paper. For several weeks, we wrestled with whether this was a book we should really write at all. Colleagues and family members tried to talk us out of it. Who were we to even write this book? What would others think of us and of our presumptuousness? But eventually, we thought, who were we *not* to write it? We would bring to it our own backgrounds, experiences and perspectives that might be different from authors with other identities, in ways, we hoped, that would complement other studies and enhance the collective body of work on the subject and on the broader quest for greater equity and inclusion.

So, then we had to consider what to say about our own positionality and how to say it. We decided against making a conventional upfront statement on it. These statements, we felt, often came across as contrived and scripted - as hair-shirt apologies or forms of virtue signalling about now classic identity categories of race, gender identity, and so on. This is a trap that, Shanee Washington, a Black American professor, and a former graduate researcher in our Ontario project, described in her PhD study involving members of the

Wampanoag Indigenous Community on Cape Cod. One Wampanoag parent, for example, described (the school's white principal) as having "a lexicon of politically correct language" and noted "when you constantly utilize politically correct language it's because there's something deeper in the surface" (Washington, 2025). This Indigenous leader and other community members in the district were not impressed with what they regarded as administrators' performative ways of engaging them.

We wanted to avoid the trap of turning positionality into performativity. Ironically, we felt, positionality statements often sounded almost like the disclaimers on medications that people are supposed to read, but who then just proceed to take them anyway. But we did and do still feel that positionality matters. So, we tried to include and express it wherever it occurred naturally and felt relevant, through the body of the text. In due course, therefore, our readers learn that we are two white middle-class men; that in Western society compared to many East Asian cultures we both have the decidedly mixed blessing of being elderly; that I (and my colleagues) have experienced many negative consequences of me having – and for a long time, hiding – ADHD; that Dennis's daughter is bisexual and, like others with her identity, not fully accepted by gay or straight communities; that all my five grandchildren are mixed race; that I grew up working class in a low income family that had significant periods in poverty; that I have lived and worked in three countries; and that Dennis experienced his own challenges of feeling welcomed when he had to move schools a lot as a child in a military family.

Once we had taken the plunge, what did we now think we have offered or tried to offer about education and identity, including its relationship to curriculum, compared to most of the rest of the existing field, that says something new and constructive in the quest for diversity, equity, and inclusion?

1. *Identity is a near-universal part of human experience and development* in all places that are not rural, traditional, and remote. We all wonder, plan, and reflect on who we are and what we are becoming and might become. Identity is an issue for all of us. It's not just about them: the others (Moore, 2016).

2. *Developing young people's sense of self and identity is a classic commitment* in the work of all educators, within and outside the curriculum. From Maria Montessori (1914) to Eric Erikson (1963, 1968), education has been about far more than learning subjects and skills – as in the German tradition of *Bildung* (Herdt, 2019), it has addressed the very essence of human development, of building the person.
3. *Identity should be a key to inclusion, not a lock that shuts people out.* Identity should not be used as a device to *call people out* and scold well-intentioned educators or students about their privilege, sexism, or racism. It should be used to *call people in*, within curriculum environments where everyone feels seen, heard, and valued. That is why, for example, our book contains several pages on and references to Christian religious and especially Pentecostal and Mennonite identities as historically persecuted sects, alongside the identities connected to other religions and ethnicities.
4. *Identities are multiple, not singular.* There is more to all of us than meets the eye. What we see isn't always what we get. In the words of queer poet, Walt Whitman (1885), we are multitudes. Concentrating the curriculum on responding to singular identities as the main strategy of cultural responsiveness runs the risk of treating people in terms of one characteristic that overrides all others. When we do this, even when we mean well, it is an insult to people's dignity.
5. *We don't have to be replicants of someone with another identity to understand them.* The magic and joy of the curriculum is its capacity not just to connect with our own identities and experiences, but also to introduce students to other forms of life and experience, in history, literature, and drama for example. If we capitulate to identity essentialism – that we are unknowable to people who are different from us – then we have given up hope in the basic purpose of education: to lead out before we lean in.

6. *We must confront oppression openly and honestly in our curriculum content* – the oppression of Indigenous First Nations; of enslaved peoples and the intergenerational traumas of the generations that succeed them; of cultures that have been or are being forcibly colonized, and so on. But we cannot pick and choose our oppressions according to personal and local prominence or ideological acceptability. We must be vocal and vigilant about Western colonial oppression of the Global South. We must also be vocal and vigilant about discrimination by higher caste Brahmins of lower caste Dalits among Indian groups that occurs from Canada to California as well as within India itself (Tiku, 2023), about Israel’s aggressive occupation and settlement of Palestinian lands, about Russia’s elimination of Ukrainian content from the curriculum and Ukraine’s elimination of Russian content in turn (Roth, 2022), and about how Japan has rewritten the curriculum concerning Japan’s oppression of Korean people in World War II (Evans, 2015). Western colonialism is *not* the overriding enemy of global freedom and inclusion. The overriding enemy is imperialism as it is and has been manifested by many cultures within and beyond Western Europe.
7. *No-one should have to hide who they are.* As the Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman (1963) pointed out in his classic analysis of stigma, when people feel they must hide their stigmatized identities, this affects others as well as themselves. This happens when racially marginalized students and teachers feel they must pass for White, when they have to pretend to be straight (if they want a promotion in a Catholic school in Canada, for example), when they are driven to talk loudly at parties if they are deaf so they don’t have to exhibit their inability to listen (Lodge, 2009), or when, as dyslexic students, they have to fake the appearance of following the text along with everyone else, when they have no clue what it is saying.
8. *We must learn to live together with people who are different from us as well as ones who are the same.* This is the essence of inclusion and belonging. The opposite of belonging is fitting in to one homogeneous and dominant culture. True belonging in the schools of today is being able to contribute to, connect with and learn from being

in diverse cultures. The point is to recognize, include, engage with, and respond to people's own identities, in all their fullness, while also being open to engaging them with other people's identities too. This not only invites people to experience the joy of difference. It also creates the magnificent possibilities of realizing that, very often, what is often essential for some of us, may be good for the rest of us.

These sorts of strategies reject the despair and dogmatism of identity essentialism without falling into the traps of kitschy multiculturalism that focus only on strengths and cultural positives, on foods and festivals, on Indigenous land acknowledgements and artistic performances. They take us not from tragedy to romance, but from the reductive approaches of essentialism and relativism to the edgy engagements with identities that are not only complex but also sometimes conflicting and contradictory.

Dennis Shirley and I have written five books together now. When we write them, we draw on both classical and contemporary research and theory, and we engage them both with each other. (We have found it increasingly difficult to get students to do this – to read anything that was published before 1990, even when we buy the books for them!). We don't cancel – we critique and connect.

One of the most important contemporary identity concepts is that of *intersectionality*. Invented by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000), intersectionality offers a way of understanding how aspects of identity in marginalized or oppressed groups are not only multiple. They also converge in catastrophic ways. In her work on battered women's shelters, Crenshaw found that research in this area tended to treat the abused women as being alike. Yet, Crenshaw pointed out, in addition to being the victims of intimate partner abuse, these women were also often poor, Black, undocumented immigrants, and didn't have English as their first language. These intersections amplified the degrees of oppression that they experienced.

The implication of the concept of intersectionality for schools, one that I have seen embedded in policy from Canada to Australia, is that students who struggle in school are often experiencing multiple forms of marginalization at the same time. Engaging with these forms in their fullness, rather than picking them off as single issues, is important when trying to increase marginalized students' chances of success.

My own work with Dennis Shirley on identity endorses the importance of Crenshaw's concept. It also critiques and adds to the concept in two ways.

First, we contrast Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality where there is a tragic convergence of multiple oppressions, with *more complex forms of intersectionality that we term conflicting* (Hargreaves & Shirley 2021). Failure to identify, acknowledge and address issues of *conflicting intersectionality* in our schools, in the curriculum and elsewhere, we argue, has oversimplified and polarized disputes about identity politics that have bequeathed terrible legacies to societies across the world, where voters and others who feel their identities are misunderstood or ignored are turning to populism as an alternate way of feeling valued (Hochschild, 2024). The stereotyped opposition in essentialist identity politics between unarguable aggressors and those who are unambiguously aggrieved has not engaged with the complexities of identity that many teachers, school leaders and parents see in front of their eyes every day.

Not all identities are defined by a clear-cut separation between good and evil, right and wrong, or oppressors and oppressed. As psychoanalysts point out, few of us are wholly good or completely bad. Most of us are a mixture of virtues and flaws. And this principle applies sociologically, as well as psychologically, in identity politics too.

Schools may want to recognize families' rights to have freedom of worship and respect for their faiths, but all three Abrahamic religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam have denominational branches that are patriarchal and homophobic. The compelling human rights of individuals with transgender and non-binary fluid identities to be protected from bullying and stigmatization come up against gender critical feminist demands to preserve hard-won rights and protections of the safety of biological women. The wisdom of old men is increasingly derided and canceled in Western intellectual discourse and curriculum texts, but revered and cherished in East Asian, Indigenous and Arabic societies. Controversies surrounding the war in Gaza have paralyzed schools and universities in knowing how to respond. And while the white working class is undeniably marginalized economically in Western societies, it also has elements that are distressingly racist and xenophobic. This brings me to the second issue concerning Crenshaw's intellectual legacy – *the neglect of economic oppression and social class*.

Class matters. Fewer than 30 people own more than half the world's wealth and in many cases pay few or no taxes on it (Coy, 2022, Elliott, 2019). The waterhole from which public schools and other public services can drink is constantly shrinking. Extreme inequality is the leading cause of ill-being in societies (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). People in societies with the smallest economic inequalities enjoy the best mental and physical health. So, as President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil and a few other leaders recognize, equity must be about imposing global wealth taxes to reduce economic inequalities and combat climate change (Harvey, 2024).

But for the best part of 40 years, social class inequality and identity have gone missing from democratic government policies, and from the movement for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). There has been silence about social class over the last three decades in educational policy, from social theories such as critical race theory, and from the school curriculum. The very origins of DEI in the United States, a society that is widely regarded as suffering from historic "class cluelessness" (Williams, 2017), placed the focus of equity on gender and race and excluded social class and economic inequality altogether. Unsolved economic inequalities have been kept off the public agenda (Giridharadas, 2019), and politics has organized itself instead around other social issues such as transgender identities, textbook content, pronoun usage, and white privilege.

The identity of the working class is flawed, for sure, but this is no reason to pass it over in the curriculum and elsewhere. As Dennis Shirley and I have shown, other identities are flawed too. Schools have Pride flags, Black History month, and heritage weeks for a range of cultural identities. But what do they do on Labour Day? They take a holiday! Where are working class abilities in fixing and making things valued in the curriculum for *all* students, not just for those who are unable to attain conventional academic success? More and more schools now have a curriculum covering financial literacy, but they do little or nothing to address how unions have been important in protecting workers' rights, advocating for equal pay for women, fighting child labour practices around the world, and bringing an end to communism in Eastern Europe. For 40 years, economic inequality, including wealth inequality and not just poverty, was ignored and social class became an invisible identity (Hargreaves, 2020a).

Postmodernism and identity essentialism and their next-generation iterations in critical race theory have excised economic inequality and social class marginalization from educational theory, curriculum theory, school policies, and public discourse. In doing so, they have infused politics and everyday life with an intellectual discourse that seems esoteric and condescending to those who have not been college-educated, and even to many of those who have. They have diminished and dismissed the metanarrative of extreme wealth accumulation in the modern context of techno-capitalism that creates the very resentments which fuel hatred of outsiders or of others who are different, and who are then blamed for having stolen “ordinary” people’s sense of pride (Hochschild, 2024). This, in turn, has fed another political metanarrative that is now tearing societies, schools and the curriculum apart – populism.

Populism and the Curriculum

Populism has a long history. It belongs exclusively to neither the Left nor the Right. Its official origins were with the People’s or Populist Party in the US in the 19th century that fought for the rights of agricultural workers against elite economic interests. In modern times, populism has become associated with emotional appeals to ordinary or pure people of various kinds against bureaucratic, corporate, and professional elites. Argentinian Peronism combined the pursuit of Left-wing goals to support workers with a charismatic and authoritarian style of governing. The term *authoritarian populism* was first used by British cultural studies theorist, Stuart Hall (1979), to describe the Right-wing government of Margaret Thatcher in the UK which pitched “small shopkeepers” in Marxist terms and elite artisan members of the working class against inflexible state bureaucracies and union leadership, along with self-serving “establishment” professionals among teachers, in higher education, and in the civil service. Somewhat inspired by her close ally, the Chilean dictator, Augusto Pinochet, Thatcher used populism to introduce the free market economics of neo-liberalism.

Like all populists, Thatcher waged war on imaginary or exaggerated external and internal enemies including labour unions, the Irish, Argentinians, the unemployed, the Black population, demonstrators against apartheid, and, later, even the families of bereaved Liverpool football supporters. Importantly for educators, she also attacked teachers in

schools and social scientists in universities, as the Trump Republican government is now doing in the United States.

In 1987, in the middle of Thatcherism, I left England for Canada because doing my work as an academic in education ethically and effectively in the context of authoritarian populism became almost impossible. Most obvious were the cuts in funding that had required me and my family to keep moving from one temporary contract to another. Even before the government introduced its National Curriculum that was organized once more around conventional subject categories, in 1988, it was already imposing its ideological control in education, through changes it imposed on teacher training (Hargreaves, 2025).

Education faculties were made to employ teacher educators whose expertise and qualifications were restricted to the conventional high-status subjects of the secondary school curriculum, like history, mathematics, or science, to the exclusion of sociology, philosophy and, for a while, even psychology. This was meant to erase liberal and socialist ideologies from faculties of education. To ensure compliance with the new regulations, the government also gained the reluctant consent of universities to open their teacher education programmes to scrutiny by inspectors if they wanted to retain their funding. Teacher training was to concentrate on core skills in subject teaching, including in primary schools. Considerations of gender equity, anti-racism, economic inequality, and so on were almost completely excised from the teacher education curriculum.

The populist attacks on schools and universities invented during Thatcherism are being repeated and intensified under the populism of Donald Trump. Curriculum control is not just an element of populism; it sits at very heart of it.

By 2024, legislators in 18 US states had passed laws restricting the teaching of race and gender, arguing that these are inherently divisive topics that pit groups against one another (Woo, Diliberti & Steiner, 2024). In Florida, Governor Ron DeSantis (2024) forbade schools and state universities to teach critical perspectives on race, gender, and social class, while Republicans specified that schools should only teach about Marxism within a mandated anti-communist framework (Luscombe, 2024). President Trump himself complains about how US colleges have become 'dominated by Marxist maniacs and lunatics' (Leingang, 2024).

On 21 January 2025, Trump signed an executive order banning all DEI initiatives funded by the US federal government within and beyond universities. He has attacked Harvard and other Ivy League institutions in a quest to demand “viewpoint diversity” and to eliminate DEI elements from the curriculum and organization of Higher Education through measures like withdrawing Federal Funding, abolishing tax sheltering from endowments, and preventing Harvard from taking international students and the substantial income they bring with them. Federal Research grants with DEI components have been instantly terminated and, in schools, the Federal Department of Education with the vital financial support it provides for students with special educational needs and other marginalized groups is being all but abolished.

Modern populism is a clear metanarrative of economic and cultural oppression in which the curriculum takes centre stage. With its combination of relativism and essentialism in an esoteric language that, outside the academy, can seem abstruse and condescending, modern curriculum theory has not only had little or nothing to say about the existence and effects of this metanarrative, with its economic as well as cultural components. It has also opened a massive double door through which populists and those who support them have been able to enter so they can feel heard, valued, included, and known. It is time for curriculum theory to rebuild and redefine itself to help counter this global threat. But how?

Several Left of Centre governments are trying to counter the emotional appeal and identity politics of authoritarian populism with technical rationalism (Sahlberg, 2024). Through explicit teaching and the science of reading, they are seeking to cut out the controversies by returning to simple metrics of improved performance and narrowed achievement gaps by imposing a less contested basic skills curriculum (Ravitch, 2020). This back to the future approach will not only achieve little more than the limited success that occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s – it will also repeat all the collateral damage on efforts to make the curriculum engaging and inclusive for all students. Sameness and narrowness do not bring about equity. They may stave off populism for a short time, but to groups who feel they have not been heard or known, and whose economic lives are not improving, numbers, metrics, data, and abstract appeals to long-term economic growth, rather than fair sharing of that growth or even of what already exists before growth, will fail to bring back those whom liberal democracies have lost.

A more positive and practical alternative is what the French intellectual, Chantal Mouffe (2018), calls *Left Populism*, or what I prefer to call *positive populism*. This is a populism that brings people together rather than driving them apart. It is a populism that sees the working class as a uniting force that has many colours, rather than a divisive force of privileged Whiteness against Black and Brown marginalization. It is a populism that engages people emotionally as well as cognitively and rationally. It is a populism that is expressed in the ordinary language of everyday people rather than in the inaccessible and condescending jargon of intellectually cloistered elites. It is a populism that calls people in as part of an inspiring quest to discover what they can learn from each other and that they can share together, rather than calling them out as privileged villains set against minoritized victims. It is a populism that welcomes the persuasive and empathetic rhetoric of charisma rather than criticizing it as heroic, masculine, anti-democratic leadership. And it is a populism that prominently addresses wealth inequality and economic marginalization rather than focusing exclusively on cultural oppression and identity politics.

What might this look like in tomorrow's curriculum, a tomorrow that already exists in some of the curriculum of today? I turn, finally, to two of my own recent efforts to accomplish this.

Conclusion

Shortly after I returned to Canada after 16 years in the United States, the largest pandemic for 100 years broke out. Early on, I wondered if there was anything I could do. What might my role be in helping schools and educators to cope with an event that was unprecedented in their lifetimes? At my new university in Ottawa where I had taken up a part-time professorship, I persuaded the university's vice-provost to provide a small start-up grant to bring together a group of colleagues whose expertise might be relevant to COVID and its impact. Over many months, we formed a small centre, where we began reading and responding to each other's work and engaging with work that was coming out about the educational impact of COVID. After we had made some progress, I led an application to the LEGO Foundation for a small grant of \$100,000 to study whether screen-based digital or green-based outdoor learning innovations were more effective during the

pandemic and in general. After some back and forth in communications, the Foundation surprisingly offered the whole team \$2.7m instead (Hollweck & Hargreaves, 2025).

Our project was explicitly based on my previous books with Dennis Shirley on how to increase student engagement and improve student wellbeing (Shirley & Hargreaves, 2021; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2022), as well as on our experience of developing or evaluating eight different innovation networks in three separate countries (Hargreaves, Parsley & Cox, 2015). It also capitalized on the experience of my co-investigator, Trista Hollweck, of working with local school networks, one of which was known to the Foundation already. Drawing on this prior work, we proposed creating a network of about 40 school teams across Canada.

The purpose of the network was to use play-based innovations in the middle years to improve student engagement and well-being for marginalized students who had been made especially vulnerable by the pandemic. School teams led by teachers focused on learning experiences that were *green* (outdoor or indoor nature-based initiatives, gardening, Indigenous learning on the land); *screen* (digital play, coding, editing, Minecraft); or *machine* (maker-oriented teaching and learning, design thinking, and construction with different materials). Many teams integrated one or more of these areas of focus into their student learning experiences.

Through online interactions and case study visits, we learned that teachers who were motivated to innovate and who were supported with opportunities to take time to connect with colleagues in their own school and elsewhere, could and did allocate at least 20% of curriculum time for the cross-disciplinary innovations the project was promoting.

We witnessed many examples of *Essential for Some, Good for All* practices (Hargreaves, Ayson & Karunaweera, 2024; Hollweck, Cotnam-Kappel, Hargreaves & Boultif, 2023; Hargreaves & Jones, 2024; Hargreaves & Jones, in press).

- A school with no self-identified Indigenous students used Indigenous art and furnishing arrangements that were circular or elliptical rather than rectangular in the design of its new building.

- An urban school that focused on clean water use as part of its interest in the UN's Sustainable Development goals, partnered with another project school in a predominantly Inuit community to learn about poor access to clean water in that community and others like it. It also engaged in deeper conversations about Inuit culture and enjoyed playing Indigenous games.
- A school team that prioritized creativity in learning and that scripted and produced movies for a film festival it hosted in the community attracted a disproportionately high number of LGBTQ+ students and was also seen as inspiring, engaging, and welcoming by all students and their families.
- Last, students in a school in a low-income working-class town grew and distributed healthy food for the community; created, published, and cooked their own recipes with attached QR code playlists; and both designed and built their own indoor growing equipment using traditional vocational skills that were employed by all of them.

Following the pandemic, when inequities have increased, mental health problems have skyrocketed, and a global crisis of student attendance is indicative of young people's inclination to just walk away from schools they feel are no longer serving them (Shirley & Hargreaves, 2024), this is not the time to revert to a narrow neo-liberal curriculum of basic skills in literacy and mathematics. Instead, we need a curriculum that will bring all students back in, that is engaging and inclusive for all of them, and that creates an atmosphere in which they can truly thrive. To do this, we must not recycle traditional subject content, categories, and boundaries, but create significant moments in every school week, where all students can learn together, across disciplines and across cultures, in ways that enable them to experience belonging and success. This is the future opportunity that the LEGO Foundation funded project sets out for all of us.

A second way of thinking about making positive changes in curriculum in the face of the onset of populism and the resurgence of neo-liberalism in educational policies, is to act systemically and even globally. One of my own contributions here has been to invent, establish and develop something called the *ARC Education Collaboratory* (Pederson, Long, Hollweck et al 2024; ARC Education Collaboratory, 2025).

The need for a group like ARC arose when, around 2010-2015, several governments were experiencing and expressing the view that there had to be more to educational policies than high stakes testing and examinations, competition between schools, and an overriding emphasis on basic skills in literacy and mathematics to the exclusion of other valuable areas of learning. Through my increasing interactions with multiple governments about my co-authored 2009 book with Dennis Shirley on *The Fourth Way* (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009a), the idea arose to establish a global coalition of like-minded democracies to preserve and protect educational values of broad excellence in the curriculum, equity, inclusion, wellbeing, democracy, and human rights. After a meeting in a Toronto restaurant in 2015 with Yngve Lindvig, Director of a Norwegian educational technology and consulting company that promotes collaborative school self-reviews with the assistance of digital tools, we founded ARC together.

ARC recruited 6 and, later, 10 systems through their Ministers or Deputy Ministers of Education. It initially located itself at Boston College in the United States which donated administrative support services of two graduate students for what was otherwise an entirely voluntary organization. ARC held its first summit in Reykjavik in September 2016, on the upcoming 30th anniversary of the Gorbachev-Regan summit in Iceland that had pledged to “tear down the walls” that were dividing our world. Since then, annual summits have been held in California, Wales, Ireland, Norway, and Scotland, as well as online summits during the COVID-19 pandemic. ARC has since been housed at the University of Ottawa and now IMTEC in Norway, one of the world’s first not-for-profit educational change organizations dating back to 1975. ARC is now a member-funded organization at a low cost of \$30,000 Cdn per year that supports a small Secretariat. It is not funded and driven by external private, technological, or political interests.

This movement began as a counterbalance to established transnational organizations like the UN, World Bank and OECD, and to national policy systems that were still preoccupied with neo-liberal uses of testing and technology as their major drivers. Through in-person annual summits, hosted by member systems; quarterly online Thoughtmeets; and guiding discussions of the member-represented Advisory Board, the ARC Secretariat has designed and facilitates a system-to-system peer coaching and problem-solving policy process in an environment of high trust and complete

confidentiality among systems united by values but varying in structures, cultures, political control, and policy strategies. Discussions are informed by school visits at the in-person summits and stimulated by a pantheon of world-class thought leaders who engage with the group throughout entire summits or at Thoughtmeets, on a no-fee, pro-bono basis.

Areas of focus arise from consultations with member systems, the Advisory Board, the hosts of in-person summits, and within the Secretariat. Recent themes have included attendance, belonging, teaching excellence, Artificial Intelligence, assessment reform, democracy, leadership, inclusion, economic and educational inequality, and responding to the rise of populism within and beyond education.

As a partial or direct result of being in ARC, systems say they have changed their policies on wellbeing, provided outdoor learning spaces for every elementary school, rethought high school examinations and assessments, deepened their approach to school attendance, upgraded the priority they give to vocational education, and used ARC to provide expert legitimacy for their more daring policy proposals.

In a global crisis of democracy, when young people need to learn about and experience democracy in their schools, we have also been reaching out to Latin democracies in addition to one of ARC's current members, Uruguay, for whom democracy is a major issue, in part because totalitarianism is still part of their living memory. The main barrier so far appears to be the political optics of long-distance travel for participating teams. We live in hopes that some leaders will be able to see past this.

Throughout ARC's first ten years, systems have come and gone with changes in political control. Movements must never stay still, or they fail to remain movements.

Curriculum studies and curriculum policy must never rest either. A key feature of the origin and value of curriculum studies was its sociological and historical character that showed how the dominant designs of subject-based curricula divided high and low status knowledge, and how they divided our communities and societies by doing so. Curriculum studies certainly needed to address other dimensions of social inequality such as race, gender, and disability. But instead of positioning curriculum in a metanarrative that could unite separate and disparate identities, postmodern and essentialist developments in curriculum studies abandoned their historical and sociological core and became lost to narratives of personal experience and to a disparate array of different forms of oppression.

The consequence of these shifts in curriculum studies has been that, with few exceptions (e.g. Priestley & Minty, 2014) there has been little or no surviving tradition within the field to combat two periods of neo-liberal preoccupations with scripted teaching around crudely tested curriculum basics that have done nothing to engage diverse populations and enable them to thrive. By focusing only some groups and not all groups, curriculum studies has also descended into a divisive identity politics that has ironically opened a populist trapdoor through which all the aspects of DEI the field had been fighting for are rapidly falling. In treating groups as mutually exclusive categories of oppressors and oppressed, DEI-influenced traditions, such as critical race theory, have ironically failed to be sufficiently diverse or inclusive, in either ethical or strategic terms (Dobbin & Kaley, 2016: 2022).

Curriculum studies now needs a rebirth and a reset that embraces and engages with metanarratives of its own in the face of the monumental metanarrative of authoritarian populism that, in part, the field has helped to bring upon itself. The Anglo-American nations have so far seemed ill-equipped for this challenge. Perhaps it will be Latin societies that will lead the charge instead.

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