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Confronting Curriculum Epistemicide: A Conversation with Editors Dan Ness & Rick Sawyer

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Abstract

As an entree into the Special Issue "Confronting Curriculum Epistemicide", NWJTE co-editor Maika Yeigh talk with editors Daniel Ness and Richard Sawyer to learn about their inspiration and goals of the Special Issue.

Keywords

curriculum theory, epistemicide

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Confronting Curriculum Epistemicide: A Conversation with Editors Dan Ness & Rick Sawyer

Maika Yeigh, Editor (MY): Thank you for your willingness to sit with me and talk about the special issue “Confronting Curriculum Epistemicide”. I truly do not think we have published anything like it before. The tensions in curriculum are as pressing as ever, and the authors whose pieces you include have captured the variety and complexities within the field. In addition to the large number of fantastic contributions, this is our first issue where poetry and art were formally invited genres. Before learning more about how the issue itself came together, I would love to learn more about the genesis of the idea—which I know is one that the two of you have been considering for quite some time. What was your foundation for this special issue?

Dan Ness, Editor (DN): My area of interest is cognition, and it originally was mathematics education and it had developed into this idea of how people think and I am really interested in the ontogenetic approach to mathematical thinking and spatial thinking from a universal point of view and so this project came about based on my other interest which is curriculum studies and the struggles of various populations across the world in regard to social justice issues related to curriculum. I happened to host a conference back in 2018 and it was the conference held at St. John’s University which was funded by the combination of St. John’s University and the American Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies (AAACS) and so the president at the time was Molly Quinn and the title of the conference was “Hood and High Line” and it was essentially a really interesting theme – really interesting topics – regarding issues related to curriculum theories and poetry and resistance toward hegemonic control of the curriculum. We invited a lot of different people to participate in the conference, and Rick actually participated as well. We held a really fascinating plenary session at the Great Hall at Cooper Union, where Abraham Lincoln presented his talk before he became president. It was a great plenary session. We had Limarys Caraballo, who is now at Teachers College, and Peter Taubman who gave a really great presentation on the state of audit in education. We started as a group, with the development of the journal, the Northwest Journal of Teacher Education, and Rick and I had this idea of taking a good deal of ideas from the AAACS Conference and bringing it forth into a special issue on curriculum epistemicide for this journal. And that is where we connected “Hood and High Line” issues, poetry for educational resistance, in connection with confrontation of curriculum epistemicide. So that is kind of where we are today. We received some really interesting articles that we have accepted for publication. It’s going to be a smash! I know it will be.

MY: When you say “Hood to High Line” – are we talking about location in New York City? I’m thinking about the High Line that runs across the city ... “

DN: Yes, so this idea of neighborhood. The High Line is the elevated level of a park area which stretches from Tribeca in southern Manhattan all the way to Hudson Yards, close to midtown.

Rick Sawyer, Editor (RS): The High Line is a beautiful park and garden built on a once abandoned elevated train line on the Westside of Manhattan. It's a symbol of the beauty and value of neglected structures and constructions and part of the inspiration of this special issue.

DN: Yes, there were train tracks that probably connected Penn Station with Hudson Yards, to the southern tip of Manhattan. They could have been both freight and passenger train lines that are no longer running. But you see this growth that basically turned into park-like areas, an elevated park, and it goes through areas such as Little Italy and Chelsea... it's just a fantastic area of regrowth. And that's the connection with this issue: regrowth, specifically within education and curriculum.

MY: Just thinking about that growth and revitalization versus a lot of the things we have seen in education that are policies put "onto" education, corporatization ... I know currently in my department and my college, we are facing a lot of influence from a grant from a nonprofit in Texas. And we are being asked to change curriculum materials around and change our program to fit this grant. And it's not based on our location or our partner school communities. In thinking about the call for manuscripts that you put together, how do you see this special issue talking to those tensions in the field.

RS: Dan and I have always been interested in those tensions. The idea for this special issue partly came from the conference we mentioned, but it's also grounded in our work that spans our careers. I remember being in the lobby of a hotel in Philadelphia maybe ten years ago talking to Dan and Steve Farenga about writing a book about curricular epistemologies and erasures. We asked, how do we challenge the hegemony that has always coursed through American education and curriculum, starting with education that only included white male property owners, excluding women, people of color, immigrants, and LGBTQ people and their lived, cultural, and grounded knowledge. And right now in this moment it's only getting worse, with the book bans in libraries and school boards becoming overtly political in demanding their right to choose (a White supremacist) content and not be controlled as they control content for everyone else.

Dan and Steve recently published an edited book about this topic. Most of my work--critical and political—is connected to this topic. Recently I've been writing about LGBTQ curriculum erasures. To understand, for example, diverse epistemologies with the European epistemology framing the curriculum, just compare what we have with a hypothetical Indigenous curriculum in schools: a curriculum based on story, family, and connection to the land. Such a curriculum would seem to be almost impossible to imagine, our "traditional" curriculum is so hegemonic and normative, and norming. And with that we are losing the voices and ways of being within different epistemologies, possibilities, and ways of interacting in the world. And as we can see – the world is collapsing. What is happening on this planet is truly frightening on so many levels.

We need to hit pause and ask how do we begin to look at curriculum in a way that opens up possibilities—and not just for one country but for the planet, humans and non-humans alike. We call this issue “Confronting Epistemicide” because we’re running out of time. This issue asks what are examples of epistemicide and how do we include epistemologies that open new possibilities.

DN: I would just add to that ... even with the fascist Trump agenda aside (and included) we also indict the neoliberal standards movement. The book that Rick alluded to was one that Steve Farenga and I edited which was entitled *Alternatives to Privatizing Public Education and Curriculum* and in it – Rick contributed a chapter to it – we essentially indict organizations like CAEP, which used to be NCATE, which at one point in the middle of the last decade, they did not support social justice, in fact they did not think of it as part of the whole picture when it comes to education. They didn’t even challenge it at all. Not just the standards movement like the Common Core, but NCATE, accrediting agencies, for-profit agencies getting in the way of education. The main theme of the book has to do with privatization. With Betsy DeVos from the last administration – that administration was on its way to privatize pretty much everything that we know of as public education.

MY: I noticed in the call that you wrote you talked about looking at principles of, kind of pushing away and looking toward principles of student and societal health and well-being. For me, I’ve been really hopeful this academic year. I’ve been to 27 public schools to meet with student teachers and their mentors and they all have done a lot of work – their schools have – on social-emotional learning, and restorative practices. Teachers seem pumped and feeling good, even after school started. Did you end up seeing that as you reviewed pieces? That teachers are turning toward that well-being?

RS: I can think of a few pieces that do. They may use different terms and descriptors for well being. For example Boni Wozolek wrote a piece about what learning *sounds* like. We also have several pieces that examine the arts within curriculum.

DN: This connection with pedagogy, curriculum, and nature. It was really interesting to see the diversity of the manuscripts that came in, the political, critical perspective. On the same line as the environment, we also have a piece on climate change curriculum in Alberta that connects with the climate change aspect of epistemicide. There is a piece of curriculum banning or censorship. And a number of other articles that explore methodological approaches to curriculum that would counter this notion of epistemicide.

RS: Another article by Marco Cerqueira and Brandon Edwards-Schuth examines an antifascist guerilla gardening curriculum, highlighting “seeds of change” and occupying vacant pieces of land. We asked them what their project teaches us; how does it operate as pedagogy? They show

how we can engage the planet and each other in a much healthier way. All of the articles involve health and wellness in some way.

MY: Just listening to you share those pieces, it occurs to me that people reading this journal who are practitioners will find things to take away, they will find ways to explain what they are doing to the powers who may be pressuring them, and that policymakers will also have entry points that they can look to as well. I also noticed that you have an exciting blend of new scholars and known scholars with contributions to this special issue. Can you speak about how you went about finding authors for this issue that focuses on curriculum epistemicide? How did you tap into people you know and whose work you follow? And can you say what you see that is exciting about these new scholars? It's exciting when we see new people in the field contributing to this issue!

DN: Going back to that AAACS conference, Molly Quinn was the president of AAACS and is very well known in the field. She is a major contributor to curriculum theory and also to a variety of ways to think about curriculum theory and that entices a lot of new researchers in the field. It's not just Molly Quinn, but Shirley Steinberg and others, they really are major contributors to the field. I know at St. John's our faculty are committed to this idea that curriculum is not a one-size fits all concept. We have at least two or three different examples here at St. John's where faculty and students wrote articles together, which is really commendable. Of course, we did not just work with our own institutions. Rick created a listserv which allowed people from different organizations to spread the word about the special issue and that had a big impact on veteran faculty and younger faculty to contribute. We have a really diverse group of authors who contributed, from all over the country and from a variety of career stages. Rick, some people from your school contributed a piece.

RS: The topic is really central to curriculum theory. Curriculum theory looks at reconceptualization and curriculum as text. You can look at it in terms of how it reflects, supports, and/or disrupts discourses of inequity that run through society. One focus of curriculum theory is the way voices have been silenced. Whose voices are included? What knowledge is of the most worth? What knowledge is rejected? All of the authors of pieces in this issue examine epistemology. This topic of epistemicide has been bubbling up for a long time. So we tapped into these forces, these dynamics in play.

DN: And some contributed poetry, what we call Poems of Resistance. And we are using them as preludes, interludes, and postludes to bring the whole issue together. We also wanted the issue to counteract the typical idea of publication rigor. This issue is very rigorous from the standpoint that every author needed to address, analyze, and challenge the status quo. At the same time we wanted to be a counter toward other issues in curriculum and social justice, and other journals in curriculum that are more traditional in their theoretical approaches.

RS: We want the presentation of the articles in the issue to be generative, to enter into dialogue with one another. So we rejected a more normative presentation of the articles to support a reconceptualization. It's amazing that we have this opportunity to publish in this way in the *Northwest Journal of Teacher Education*. It's become an arena for different voices. We are contributing ideas that are not heard very much. And to have complex conversations. We don't want to present these articles as being definitive; we want to open up a space for conversation about all the complexities.

MY: I feel this epistemicide in my work in so many ways. I really cannot wait to find more connections between my work and these contributions. I think it will give me hope and also help me understand more about how people are navigating the space. Thank you so much for bringing it forward!