

Book Review

Conflicts in curriculum theory: Challenging hegemonic epistemologies

João M. Paraskeva

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Reviewed by: Sardar M. Anwaruddin

University of Toronto, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE)

The title under review, *Conflicts in Curriculum Theory: Challenging Hegemonic Epistemologies*, makes an important and timely contribution to the internationalization of curriculum studies. In this book, João Paraskeva called for freeing the curriculum from Western epistemological boundaries. He drew heavily on Santos (2008) who argued that “the decolonization of science is based on the idea that there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice [and] the logic of the monoculture of scientific knowledge and rigor must be confronted with the identification of other knowledges” (p. xlix). Situated in this line of thought, Paraskeva made a strong argument for epistemological diversity and cognitive pluralism. He recommended that we “assume consciously that (an)other knowledge is possible” and that we “go beyond the Western epistemological platform, paying attention to other forms of knowledge and respecting indigenous knowledge within and beyond the Western space” (p. 152).

Paraskeva looked at the field of curriculum studies from a historical perspective. He used the metaphor of a river to offer an understanding of how the field has evolved and how different theorists fought to control the flow of the river. Referring to various tensions in the field, he proposed an itinerant curriculum theory to fight against epistemicide. He argued that deterritorialization of the field was necessary to achieve socially just curricula because the knowledge of the Western male had dominated the field of curriculum and other knowledges have been silenced.

In chapter 1, “The Nature of Conflict,” Paraskeva delineated various conflicts in the curriculum field from a historical point of view. He discussed how school curricula have traditionally avoided conflicts and tensions and reproduced social inequalities through hidden curricula. At the heart of these conflicts was the agenda of knowledge: what knowledge was worth knowing? As Paraskeva mentioned: “the nature of conflict is determined by the dynamics—of form and of content—inherent in the ways socially valid knowledge is diffused throughout the schools” (p. 22). The author then traced how critical progressive theorists, such as Apple, Giroux, and others, have challenged dominant and oppressive traditions within the field of curriculum studies.

Chapter 2, “The Struggle over Knowledge Control,” presented a historical account of curriculum inquiry in the United States (U.S.) from the 1890s to the beginning of the 20th century. It illustrated the tensions within the field and the battles for controlling knowledge. Discussing the works and thoughts of prominent theorists, such as Eliot, Hall, Ward, Rice, Harris, and others, Paraskeva explained how these curriculum pioneers were engaged in conflicts over knowledge control.

In chapter 3, “A Simplistic Tool for a Lethal Phenomenon,” the author focused on curriculum conflicts in the U.S. in the early part of the 20th century when society faced strong challenges from industrialism. Paraskeva examined dominant traditions, for example, the humanism of Harris and Eliot, the manual education of Prosser, the vocational education of Snedden, and the social efficiency model of Bobbitt and Charters. In this era, the curriculum field witnessed a plethora of conflicting theories from curricularists, such as Dewey, Inglis, Bode, Kilpatrick, and Ayers.

Chapter 4, “The Emergence of Ralph Tyler,” narrated Tyler’s arrival and dominance in the field. The author claimed that Tyler conquered the field by successfully incorporating both dominant and non-dominant traditions of the time. However, Tyler was not immune to criticism. Paraskeva argued that Tyler’s rationale:

created a kind of no-man’s land..., a silenced and obscure domain in which many of the fundamental issues of educational politics are played out. It is this nucleus of political decisions about education that Tyler silences by omitting a crucial analysis of the role played by powerful interest groups in the determination of the curriculum. (p. 73)

Here, Paraskeva echoed scholars such as Anyon (1980) and Apple (1990) who have shown how the official curriculum based on Tyler’s rationale promoted and legitimized the cultures and ideologies of dominant classes and perpetuated relations of domination through schooling.

In chapter 5, “The Prosser Resolution,” the author unearthed how the aftermath of World War Two created new challenges for curriculum studies. The social efficiency model was no longer the trend. Rather, the social demands of the postwar era called for *life adjustment education*. Paraskeva believed that this was an incarnation of the models proposed by Bobbitt and Charters, but in a more humanized way and with more emphasis on social problems. Although Tyler was still “the dominant spokesperson of the curriculum field,” scholars such as Schwab, “opposed the positivism and behaviorism that determined the rhythms of the majority of classrooms throughout the country” (p. 94).

Chapter 6, “The Struggle for Curriculum Relevance,” presented a detailed account of the social, political, and ideological tensions that the U.S. faced during the 1960s. The Vietnam War and the civil rights movement provided many challenges to curriculum theorists. Student revolts, protests against segregation, and demands for social justice and culturally relevant curricula profoundly influenced the field. Curriculum relevance and the socio-political functions of schooling were a central theme in the works of many scholars, for instance Du Bois. The chapter also reported on the works of contemporary neo-Gramscians, such as Apple and Giroux, who problematized hegemonic structures in curriculum.

In chapter 7, “The Emergence and Vitality of a Specific Critical Curriculum River,” Paraskeva argued that the field has recently gone in too many directions. To contextualize current tensions, he turned back to the 19th century and demonstrated the relevance of the earlier tensions to contemporary curriculum studies. To trace the roots of what he called the critical progressive river, he focused on the socio-reconstructionist movement. Recognizing the difficulty of engaging in debates on various theories in the field, he argued that the permanence of conflicts and the search for new meanings and tensions have given the field a unique feature.

In the last chapter, “Challenging Epistemicides: Toward an Itinerant Curriculum Theory,” the author claimed that we need to fight against the coloniality of knowledge and prevent epistemicide in order to achieve culturally relevant, democratic, and socially just curricula. To achieve these, the metaphorical curriculum river must go beyond the Western epistemic

harbour. Paraskeva described this struggle and process as an itinerant curriculum theory. A fundamental underpinning of this theory was “a theory of non-places and non-times is, in essence, a theory of all places and all times” (p. 177). Building on Santos’s ideas, Paraskeva argued that an itinerant curriculum theory “will challenge one of the fundamental characteristic[s] of abyssal thinking: the impossibility of co-presence of the two sides of the line; it will challenge the cultural politics of denial, that produces a radical absence, the absence of humanity, the modern sub-humanity” (p. 188).

Paraskeva’s itinerant curriculum theory is an important and timely contribution to the internationalization of curriculum studies. Curriculum inquiry has traditionally occurred within national borders and has been shaped by national policies and priorities. Moreover, any effort to understand curriculum inquiry from an international perspective has been influenced by the curricular methods and concepts available in dominant nations. Recently, there have been efforts to internationalize the field, for example in the initiatives of organizations such as International Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies. However, despite some gains in the internationalization project, “there is also strong evidence that the field remains steadily ensconced in the work of scholars located primarily in academic institutions in the United States, Canada, Britain, and, to a lesser extent, Australia” (Gaztambide-Fernández & Thiessen, 2012, p. 1). In this sense, Western English-speaking scholars are controlling the projects of knowledge production and distribution in the field of curriculum studies not only by publishing their curriculum inquiries, but also grounding their inquiries in the works of other Western scholars. Therefore, the internationalization of curriculum inquiry needs to create transnational spaces where scholars from all over the world can trust each other and contribute to their collective work (Gough, 2003). Paraskeva’s *Conflicts in Curriculum Theory* presents compelling arguments for the creation of these transnational spaces and for the achievement of what Pinar (2003) envisioned as a worldwide field of curriculum studies.

References

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Sardar M. Anwaruddin teaches English at North South University in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Currently, he is working towards his Ph.D. in Curriculum Studies and Teacher Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) of the University of Toronto in Canada. His articles have appeared in the *Journal of English as an International Language*, *Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, *Asian EFL Journal*, *Canadian Journal of Action Research*, *Asiatic*, *Transnational Curriculum Inquiry*, and *Policy Futures in Education*. He can be contacted at s.anwaruddin@mail.utoronto.ca.