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FINDING OPPORTUNITIES AND TEACHING IN THE CRACKS

There is a fast-changing landscape in education. Schools, teachers, and students continually are adjusting to both rhetoric and mandates that restrict and narrow the very definition of curriculum in classrooms. This reductionary movement in educational policy leads to more and more schooling by traditional methods that often fail to capture the attention of students. High-stakes tests and other pressures associated with the current educational reform movement give critical educators concerned with issues related to justice, equity, and community engagement significant pause. To provide a meaningful curriculum that immerses students in the practice of transferable skills, this group of justice-oriented educators is forced to find ways to teach in alternative and even subversive ways in order to reach the students in their classrooms. Given the climate in schools, teachers and sometimes whole schools must search for and find openings within the mandates or prescriptions in order to “teach in the cracks” of what has been considered the “official curriculum” so that their teaching can connect students with issues relevant to their lives.

These teachers’ pedagogy embodies the complexities of teaching. Rather than ignore top-down expectations, a teacher’s teach-in-the-cracks process seeks opportunities within or alongside such mandates in order to engage the immediate classroom participants—namely, the students and the teacher working together—in a worthwhile curriculum. Teaching in the cracks addresses an ongoing consternation about having to follow an “expected curriculum” while also promoting discovery and student engagement by placing the students’ ideas, interests, and identified community problems at the center of the classroom curriculum. This method leads students to endeavor with their teachers in meaningful curricula both in and outside of the classroom.

This book examines how teachers can find ways to educate in such emergent, democratic ways centered on a progressive educational philosophy that places students’ ideas about what is worthwhile as a driving force of what will be studied in the classroom. The stories of educators engaged in this work

amid all the high-stakes, troubling, and deficit-oriented rhetoric, and limited interpretations of curriculum, push back on the notion that curricula need to be scripted, teacher-proofed, or exclusively skill-based. Instead, this approach shows the power and potential of teachers exploring with young people to find ways that honor both the curiosities of students and their humanity. In so doing, it encourages opportunities to make schooling experiences responsive to students in what Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995, 2009) has described as culturally relevant ways. Instead of ignoring contextual factors that affect teaching and learning, this approach embraces students as a key component of the curriculum. The schools and teachers highlighted in this book show ways to intrinsically motivate and engage students through approaches to curriculum that lead to more holistic achievement, promote critical thinking and critical understanding, encourage problem posing and problem solving, demonstrate powerful learning, and establish the deep potential for young people to see themselves as active agents in bringing about social change.

LEARNING DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

Looking to students to generate curriculum serves a significant purpose of education in America, in that it allows students to develop as critical thinkers about real-world concerns. There has long been a premise that schooling in the United States should teach dialogue, deliberation, and debate as a way to encourage and maintain an active democracy. Ideally, such skills are learned within a school curriculum so that competencies are developed and nurtured throughout a child's tenure from preschool through high school. This argument contends that children's experience ought to be steeped in an understanding of and practice in developing democratic communities.

The work of John Dewey frames the need for schools, particularly public ones, to inculcate future generations in learning democratic processes. In his most detailed argument on this idea, *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1916) contends the "ideal may seem remote of execution, but the democratic ideal of education is a farcical yet tragic delusion except as the ideal more and more dominates our public system of education" (p. 98). In this democratic ideal, schools should be sites that foster students' engagement in decisionmaking, problem solving, and critical thinking. This Deweyan approach to a progressive view of education—where students make decisions, ask questions, solve problems, and actively think, and where content builds upon and emerges from itself—is often in direct contrast with the ways many schools currently function. The norm in schools today has become an overreliance on subject-matter orientations to curriculum, rote learning

and memorization of discrete and canonical facts, and attention to results on standardized achievement tests (even when many of the so-called reformers claim that the movement toward Common Core State Standards and their associated tests moves away from this). Dewey (1907) and later Maxine Greene (1986) convincingly promoted schools acting as miniature communities. What would happen if schools were representative of society, as Dewey and Greene argued for, where students learned and practiced teamwork, collaboration, and leadership development through interactions with their peers and teachers each and every day? Such an approach to schooling is not lost among contemporary scholars, although its practices are less often seen in classrooms.

For instance, Pedro Noguera (2003, 2008) challenges us to reflect on and work to reclaim the promise of public education. In his book *City Schools and the American Dream*, Noguera (2003) contemplates hopefulness in imagining a system of schooling that connects with and reaches its students. By drawing on Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's ideas of critical consciousness, reflection, and the need for taking action, Noguera highlights the democratic potential of schools. Importantly, Noguera (2008) poses such a challenge to all of us with students in mind, particularly emphasizing "how listening to students can help schools to improve" (p. 61).

This idea of consciousness can be seen in William Ayers's (2016) book, *Teaching with Conscience in an Imperfect World*. Ayers prompts us to imagine what is possible through schools and schooling:

Are we conscientiously and systematically teaching free people to participate fully in a free society? In what ways? Could we do a better job of encouraging young people to interrogate the world fully, to ask deeper questions and to pursue those questions to their furthest limits? Do we intentionally and openly help children and youth develop minds of their own? And do we simultaneously offer students opportunities to be responsible and participating members of their communities? What can we imagine our schools being or becoming that they are not yet? How might we get there? (p. 2)

This series of questions likely raises further questions. But imagine, as Ayers encourages us to do, that we took such a deliberation and contemplation to our students. What might the young people believe to be good and just and appropriate for teaching and learning? How can we improve schooling by listening to and learning from students (Noguera, 2008; Schultz, 2011)? It is through such discussions—a miniature community, if you will—that we can not only teach into the cracks of our current system, but also begin to develop a meaningful alternative.