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Who Defines the Public in Public Education

Lorraine Kasprisin

Western Washington University, lorraine.kasprisin@wwu.edu

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EDITORIAL

Who Defines the Public in Public Education

Lorraine Kasprisin, editor

The theme of this issue of the *Journal of Educational Controversy* continues the conversation that was started in our Fall 2011/Winter 2012 issue where we published our first article on the events occurring in Arizona with the passing of HB 2281. The legislation:

- Prohibits a school district or charter school from including in its program of instruction any courses or classes that:
 - Promote the overthrow of the United States government.
 - Promote resentment toward a race or class of people.
 - Are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group.
 - Advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals.

The legislation targeted the Mexican American Studies Program in the Tucson Unified School District in Arizona, and the Director of Student Equity in the district, Augustine Romero, contributed an article in that issue depicting the history of the events that led eventually to the dismantling of the program. In our current issue, we provide a perspective from a teacher who was caught up in the events and watched the books he was using banned from his classroom. Curtis Acosta's article, "Dangerous Minds in Tucson: The Banning of Mexican American Studies and Critical Thinking in Arizona," is followed with an interview that we videotaped in our studio when Curtis visited our campus on October 17, 2013. Curtis also gave a very dynamic presentation later that day on the topic, "Pedagogies of Resiliency and Hope, which we have also embedded in this issue of the journal. Curtis Acosta is also featured in the documentary, *Precious Knowledge*. We have included an excerpt from the film followed with a printed interview with the director, Ari Palos.

While we took the opportunity in this issue of the journal to expand our understanding of these events in Arizona, we wanted also to examine some of the broader questions that these events raise. The Arizona incident raises many larger questions about what knowledge is of most worth, whose perspective gains ascendancy in the curriculum, and what public is represented in the public schools. As we pose in our scenario, controversies have emerged not only over what should be included in specific areas like the literary canon, historical interpretations, science curriculum, etc., but also in the larger arena of ideological frameworks over what it means to be human, what it means to be an educated person, and what social values should frame a public education in a society that embeds a fundamental tension between its capitalist economic system and its democratic egalitarian ideals. Even the tension between the secular and the religious continues to defy easy answers in a society that values separation between church and state. As Warren Nord says about the typical study of economics, it assumes that "economics is a science, people are essentially self-interested utility-maximizers, the economic realm is one of competition for scarce resources, values are

personal preferences and value judgments are matters of cost-benefit analysis.”¹ In effect, the so-called secular study of economics makes a number of assumptions about human nature, society, and values. What are left out of this study of the economic domain of life is the theologian’s questions of social justice, stewardship, poverty and wealth, human dignity and the meaningfulness of work. To what degree do students understand or are even aware of these hidden assumptions in their study of economics and other subjects? To what degree should other perspectives be included? We invited authors to shed some light on these questions.

In our first section of the issue, we publish articles by authors who have responded to these larger questions in a variety of ways.

We start with a philosophical essay by Walter Feinberg, who provides a framework about the nature of the question we are asking or should be asking in “Ask Not Only Who defines the Curriculum: Rather Ask too What the curriculum Aim should be.” After analyzing our use of the concept of power in our controversy, Feinberg finds it insufficient, and proposes that we examine instead the deeper issue of the theory that sustains a certain way of thinking. His thesis is taken up by several other authors who analyze different aspects.

In “Attack of the Cyborgs: “Economic Imperialism” and the Human Deficit in Educational Policy-Making and Research,” Scott Ellison looks at the influence that neoclassical economic theory has had on the language and assumptions of educational policymaking and its detrimental effects. Guoping Zhao, on the other hand, picks up the theme of the nature of the public and its creation in his article, “The Public and Its Problem: Dewey, Habermas, and Levinas.”

In his article, “Religious Citizens in a Secular Public,” John Covaleskie looks at the role of religious influences on public school decision-making in a secular society. Using Thomas Green's notion of "public speech," he tries to find a way of thinking about the inclusion of certain religious fundamentalist groups, who politically challenge the decisions in the public schools, into the public conversation without compromising either the constitutional separation of church and state or the disciplinary authority of the curriculum (especially science).

Looking at the way power relations can be hidden behind seemingly neutral federal legislation, Kerry Burch in “Reading NCLB as a Form of Structural Violence,” examines three forms of “structural violence” that our current educational regime creates whose cumulative effect is ultimately harmful and injurious to “the very idea of America’s democratic prospect.” In addition to his article, we have also provided a review of Burch’s insightful book, *Democratic Transformations: Eight Conflicts in the Negotiation of American Identity*.

Boaz Tsabar brings an international perspective to our question in his article, “Critical Study of the Concept of ‘Public Identity’ as Manifested in Postmodernist Versions of Critical Pedagogy.”

Tsabar finds that all the theories from Marxist pedagogies to postmodernist versions of critical pedagogy did not help in his search for a concept of public identity that illuminated his experiences teaching in one of Jerusalem's "toughest inner-city public schools," with a diverse student body of Mizrachi, Ethiopian and Russian Jews. His paper proposes a new, more dynamic, dialectical concept of public identity.

Finally, we publish a different approach to the topic with Anthony Pellegrino, Kristien Zenkov, and Gerardo Aponte-Martinez's article on "Middle School Students, Slam Poetry and the Notion of Citizenship." How do we get young people to think more deeply about the nature of the public? Using multimodal texts and media (e.g., digital photography and slam poetry), the authors want to see if students' descriptions and illustrations of citizenship with these new modalities can enable them to probe their thinking more deeply. Their paper reveals the responses of their students with illustrations from their poetry and photography.

In Section 2, we focus on the news event that spurred this discussion of the public, namely, the banning of the Mexican American studies program in the Tucson Unified School District in Arizona. In his article, "Dangerous Minds in Tucson: The Banning of Mexican American Studies and Critical Thinking in Arizona," Curtis Acosta, the teacher whose books were banned from his classroom, looks at the language and assumptions of the politicians and the reality of his classrooms. His article poses four questions:

- What type of critical thinking is dangerous enough to require surveillance by Arizona state officials, legislation and ultimately state takeover, erasure and destruction of effective educational spaces?
- What type of thinking is being encouraged through state and local leadership?
- What are the implications of not challenging status quo, educational practices or the discourse of educational reformers?
- How do we challenge and resist educational hegemony?

Readers can also listen to a videotaped interview with the author along with his presentation at a forum sponsored by the journal. On May 14, 2014, the journal will also sponsor a seminar to discuss Curtis Acosta's article with him by Skype at Western Washington University. With the spring seminar as a follow-up to the fall forum, we are hoping to encourage an ongoing discussion of these issues.

We invite our readers to join us in this conversation on "Who Defines the Public in Public Education," in our Rejoinder section and on our blog.

1. Warren A. Nord, "The Relevance of Religion to the Curriculum," *The School Administrator*, January 1999.