

2014

Ask Not Only Who Defines the Curriculum: Rather Ask Too What the Curriculum Aim Should Be

Walter Feinberg

Charles Hardie Professor, Emeritus, The University of Illinois, Champaign/Urbana

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/jec>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Feinberg, Walter (2014) "Ask Not Only Who Defines the Curriculum: Rather Ask Too What the Curriculum Aim Should Be," *Journal of Educational Controversy*: Vol. 8 : No. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/jec/vol8/iss1/2>

This Article in Response to Controversy is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-reviewed Journals at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Educational Controversy by an authorized editor of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

Ask Not Only Who Defines the Curriculum: Rather Ask Too What the Curriculum Aim Should Be.

Walter Feinberg
The University of Illinois, Emeritus

I have been asked to address the question “who defines the curriculum?” On one level the answer to this question is quite easy and requires little more than a look at the legal codes regulating education and school boards. On another level it seems to call for a close empirical analysis of decision-making in individual districts and schools. However, since the question is asked by the editors of *The Journal of Educational Controversy* and partly in response to the banning of the Mexican American curriculum in Arizona, I presume the question is intended to have more bite, and is more accurately interpreted as two questions: First, who has the *power* to define the curriculum, and second, who *should* have the power to define it? Re-framed in this way it may be read as a rhetorical question where the answer to the first part is the power elite, and the answer to the second part is anyone but the power elite.

Yet this response assumes a great deal about the distribution of power—for example, that there is just one power elite or that the interests of different power elites are all aligned with one another. I do not have the skill needed to test such assumptions. My own off-the-cuff view is that the question can be misleading if it is meant to suggest that only one group defines the curriculum or if it invites a lot of speculation about an educational conspiracy. The problem is that these assumptions personalize the issue—as if there were but one group with a singular interest, defining some unitary body of purported knowledge framed by schools and transmitted by teachers who serve as the willing or unwilling agents of this singular group. Of course, this may be the correct view, but I do not see things in that way and find this image problematic. For example, the curriculum can be a site of contestation, but it is rarely controlled completely by one group without the tacit consent of others. It may be, of course, that one group has more power than I think it should have, but that does not necessarily mean that it has complete control. In addition, the fact that sometimes the curriculum is controlled by one group to the disadvantage of others may not be bad in every situation. It depends on the groups and issues involved. I am not particularly worried when creationists are overruled or voted out of office, replaced by school board members more friendly to an evolutionary view, or when textbook publishers reject global warming deniers’ request for equal time. I find nothing commendable about the resistance from these groups to school boards and textbook publishers who reject their interests. Of course, their resistance may be sociologically interesting and worthy of study in that sense, but educational merit is a different matter. Moreover, even where resistance is justified, as, for example, where ethnic identity has been neglected or sexism perpetrated, where there are bitter and justifiable struggles over some aspect of the curriculum, there is usually a consensus over other parts of it that do not appear objectionable. For example, with a few exceptions, math and the physical and

chemical sciences seem to get a free ride, while social studies, history, and literature often do not. While questions are often raised about access to math and non-life science courses, few outside of the education profession raise questions about their importance, at least when taught in a traditional manner. We need to distinguish then between the power to include an item in the curriculum and the power to exclude an item. In many cases, it is easier to censor than to introduce. *Hegemony* refers much more often to the power of veto rather than to the power of inclusion, and indicates a structure of decision-making where choice is limited in such a way that a certain interest is not challenged.

The image of a power elite versus everyone else is often misleading as, for example, in those instances in which members of an ethnic minority group object to a gay-friendly curriculum. Here it is one minority group resisting a curriculum that represents the interest of another minority group. While power is an important element in defining the curriculum, we can overlook other important factors if we reduce everything to a power struggle. For example, dominant power often issues from a theoretical base, and unless that theory is addressed, changes will be superficial. Even if successful in some sense, the danger is that one group replaces another. The players may change but not the basic structure in which action is taken and constrained.

For example, many—not necessarily a majority-- in minority communities accept recent innovations introduced by the economic, neo-liberal elite, such as charter schools and vouchers. Although they may not always be pleased by the source of these reforms, if they are even aware of it, a significant number of minority parents believe that vouchers or charter schools are in their children's interest. And, indeed, if one accepts the basic inequality in American society, then these innovations do serve some students, although their larger impact is problematic.

The question as to whether the reforms leave many worse off should be the focus of more debate than it is, but parents struggling to protect their children from a dangerous environment or an inadequate school cannot be blamed if they do not ask this larger question. Visions of safety and a decent education, whether realistic or not, will drive many parents to support the choices that the neoliberal agenda allows them to have. For the larger picture, this may well be an educational disaster allowing poverty to go unaddressed, but to address this problem requires communal and political resources not always available. It may be easier to apply to the parochial school around the block than to wait for another community organizer like Saul Alinski to appear!

My point is not to reject the question of who defines the curriculum, but to point out that if it is meant as more than just a rhetorical question, it requires more than just an examination of power. It involves an examination of the dominant theories that serve to govern educational discourse and to set educational choice. And, most important, it also requires a vision of what education and the curriculum should be aiming at.

My own concern is with the special role of a public school in preparing a public and in the way the dominant, neo-liberal, (not really so neo and not really so liberal) economic paradigm has taken over educational debate. This paradigm emphasizes freedom in the form of individual parental choice, standardized tests, and economic growth—both individual and social--but it does little for inequality or real public deliberation. This paradigm has its roots in a certain kind of economic theory that goes under a variety of names, such as classical liberalism, neo-liberalism, and the Chicago school. Whatever the name, however, the basic goal is purported to be to maximize freedom of choice through competition at the level of input and standardized tests at the level of output. Many people accept the results of this paradigm without giving much thought to the theory. Charter schools allow wealthy parents opportunities to have their own children educated with other wealthy children, but in some places and within safe limits, it also gives Hispanic parents an opportunity to have a school that emphasizes Hispanic culture. Vouchers in Cleveland and Milwaukee can help Catholic parents continue to send their own children to the preferred Catholic schools. Given the question: Who defines the curriculum? The neo-liberals seemingly benign answer is, everybody does. Schools propose: parents dispose. So what is the problem?

Choice is not the same as Freedom

The problem is that choice is not always free, and there are conditions when the introduction of choice policies actually serves to distort preferences. The problem is also that neo-liberal choice defies the basic mission of a public school. Let's consider these two problems in turn : First, how can it be that choice is not always free.

Consider the following example: All of the parents on K Street prefer to send their children to the neighborhood school. They prefer this because the neighborhood school, while not the best academically, is pretty good, and because they want their children's school friends to be their neighborhood friends. There are actually many benefits to this, including the reinforcement of norms when neighbors know each other through knowing each other's children. However, once choice is introduced, each parent realizes that their desire for the overlap of school friends and neighborhood friends is no longer possible. Hence, each parent lists as their first choice the best academic school in the town. Some parents are successful; others are turned down. Some do get the school in the neighborhood, but it is no longer the *neighborhood* school. It is only located *in* the neighborhood.;it is not *of* the neighborhood. The result is that no parents get their preferred school because the preferred school would be a neighborhood school with all neighborhood children. And while some parents do get their second choice, the best academic school, most do not. In this case, the introduction of choice results in denying parents' their preferences and in making them worse off than they would have been without choice. (Feinberg 2013)

Think then of the potential relationships that might have developed between neighbor and neighbor through the mutual care for their children as having had a potential reality, aborted though it was. The group, then, would not be reducible to all of its members because, while all the members remain the same, their relationship to one another would be different. In one setting they are essentially isolated from each other, while in the other, through their children and the school, they are in communicative relation with one another. Here the group develops a kind of ontological status or a reality that, while including the desires of its members, is not reducible to those members, because it creates possibilities for new and more reflective desires to be formed. Choice has not added freedom to the group because the desire formed under choice—to attend the best academic school—is not the same as a preference that is shaped through shared communication and reflection.

Missing is a mode of communication among individual parents that is essential in the formation of shared values. Without such communication, in selecting the best academic school for their child all of the parents can be said to now hold the same values, and in this sense, they are shared, but they are shared serially, i.e. by each individual one at a time. By privatizing choice, all of this neglects a basic mission of a public education—to prepare and reproduce a democratic public. And it takes away the school itself as an object around which is formed a public where differences matter and are addressed. The example, of course, is limited, as anyone who is aware of the restricted neighborhood covenants, now illegal, would be aware. However, it is not meant to endorse neighborhood schools as such but to make a point about the difference between choice and freedom.

The Neglect of the Idea of a Public

Now for the second problem: the neglect of a public and the denial of a basic mission of public education. Ideally the *public* school mission, one that should distinguish it from private and religious schools' missions, is to renew a public by providing the young with the skills, dispositions, and perspectives required to engage with others about their shared interests and about their common fate. This is not its only role. Much like religious and private schools, public schools have a vocational mission, to prepare students with the skills and dispositions to enter the work place; they have a communal role where students learn to support one another and to build communities based on interest and disposition, and they also have a personal role, to enable a child to develop into a healthy, functioning adult. Ideally, these roles are nested together and the reflective self becomes the critical, reflective citizen, but I want here to focus for a moment on the first task mentioned above: to renew a public. Focusing on this task will enable us to see the fundamental error in neo-liberalism. Let's begin with a fundamental assumption of neo-liberalism.

The classical *laissez-faire* liberal acknowledged the legitimacy of only two forms of associations, i.e., associations of interests, which included markets and governments, and associations of sentiments, which included families, tribes and nations. This meant that any idea like a public is to be understood as nothing but a collection of individuals voicing an opinion on some topic or other.

There is, however, an alternative view: Here the formation of public values occurs gradually, sometimes imperceptibly, often taking decades, while pervading both consciousness and practice. The process does not occur in just one institution—the schools or the courts—but is diffused throughout the society at large, is messy, and its outcome, uncertain. It takes place in protests on the streets, in the media, in arguments at the dinner table as well as in the quiet of libraries, and the imperceptible changes in scholarly journals, dictionaries and encyclopedias. But when complete, it has infused both individual subjectivities and objective institutions with new ways of thinking and judging, and becomes an object of self-consciousness and an aim of self-development. I have argued elsewhere that the concepts of *racism* and *sexism* illustrate this historical development (Feinberg 2007).

Neo-liberals fail to understand this movement, and this failure leads them to wrongly neglect how their own emphasis on choice actually can serve to limit freedom. As the example about K street parents illustrates, there are conditions when the introduction of choice policies actually serves to distort preferences. Dewey (1927/1988) had a different view of democracy and choice:

Majority rule, just as majority rule, is as foolish as its critics charge it with being. But it is never merely majority rule. . . . The means by which a majority comes to be a majority is the important thing: antecedent debates, the modification of views to meet the opinions of minorities. . . . The essential need, in other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. (p. 207)

In my view, the singular goal of public education is to renew a public by providing the young with the skills, dispositions, and perspectives required to engage with strangers about their shared interests and common fate and to contribute to shaping it. Neither religious schools nor vocational or private schools have this as their unique mission, even though some may choose to take it on. This goal is consistent with the development of a reasonable level of proficiency in traditional subject areas, and it certainly does not preclude the importance of education for the development of useful and demanding skills as well as for individual growth. Indeed, this is a condition of education in general, whether public or not. The idea of a *public* education simply adds another dimension to this, one as concerned with matters of pedagogy and method as it is with subject matter.

Since that conversation between strangers extends across generational lines and involves the development of the capacity to reflect on and address common values, sometimes to renew them, sometimes to change them, a public education requires students to understand and develop their own agency. It also requires that they gain perspective on their own commitments and emotional responses. Distance and perspective are gained in the academic curriculum by developing the habit of reflecting on one's own production, whether it be an art work, a piece of writing, an argument, a math proof, or a craft production, a set of beliefs and to see it through the eyes of others. This is one reason why open discussion and critical peer evaluation are important components of public education, and why subject-matter proficiency alone, while necessary, is not sufficient. Perspective and distance are also gained through both the formal and non-formal aspects of school life in terms of the inclusiveness of the student body and the teachers and the way in which interaction among different cultural, religious, racial, social-class, and gendered groups is encouraged. In schools where students from different backgrounds can intermingle, stereotypes can be directly addressed, and uncritically accepted assumptions can be reconsidered. When this happens, then a public school is working.

References

Dewey, J. (1927/1988). *The public and its problems*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.

Feinberg, W. (2012). The idea of a public education. *Review of Educational Research*, 36, 1-22.

Feinberg, W. (2007). Racism: the birth of a concept. K. Roth & I. Gur-Zeev (eds.), *Education in the era of globalization* (161-168). The Netherlands: Springer.