

## Deliberating Complicated Conversations in Curriculum Discourse for Social Justice

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### Abstract:

Taking inspiration from Dewey's (1998) writing on experience and education and Pinar's (1981) conception of *currere*, dealing with autobiographical reflections of individuals regarding their educational experiences, I would like to problematize the curriculum studies as a broad education studies field in Thailand, and social studies education in particular. Locating my own positionality as a curriculum worker, I perceive curriculum as an educational text that opens diverse possibilities for critical-reflective and deliberative thoughts about my educational experiences throughout my life. Shifting the personal conception from curriculum development to curriculum understanding discourse, I have gained insights that curriculum is a hermeneutic journey through one's lived experiences grounding on the socio-cultural, historical, and political economy of each specific society. The field of curriculum studies and social studies education is still under the various forms of technical-instrumental rationality at all levels of education. I have come to recognize the reason why curriculum development becomes a mainstream educational narrative in curriculum history and theory and is currently still the powerful hegemonic discourse for conceptualizing curriculum in Thailand. Critical reflection on such discourse, therefore, has the potential to cause individuals to change their recurrently entrenched normative beliefs about curriculum and knowledge production as well as educational praxis, and to augment transformative knowledge and deliberative actions.

**Key words:** Currere, educational experiences, curriculum studies, social studies, social justice

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### **Introduction**

To create democracy, equity, and social justice in our society, educators believe that their involvements in curriculum, pedagogy, and knowledge production are to question the genuine meaning of education, and to strive for the attainment of a socially just curriculum. This context becomes the fundamental premise in the field of curriculum studies, which is conceptualized around various disciplinary and interdisciplinary theory and practices in social sciences, humanities, and science and technology that intersect in the sites of knowledge production such as curriculum and education.

In so doing, curriculum discourse for social justice is one of the curricular discourses that aim for building democracy, equity, and social justice in our society through curriculum theory and practices. Social studies education as well as citizenship and history education has been ideologically grounded in educational progressivism and social reconstructionism. Prominent social reconstructionist educators such as George S. Counts, Harold Rugg, and Theodore Brameld argued that education, schooling, curriculum, and pedagogy should be grounded upon social reconstructionist ideology in order to build a new social order out of an unjust society (Hursh & Ross, 2000). Thus, educators should work toward social justice by practicing democratic ideals in schools, participating in collective solidarity, and striving for socio-cultural and economic justice. John Dewey also advocated for radical democracy and social reconstruction, and the essence of his philosophical ideology influences the lived worlds of many contemporary curriculum theorists, social studies and multicultural educators, and critical pedagogues to work for social justice both in theory and social praxis. Therefore, curriculum discourse for social justice becomes a shared tenet and ideological goal that both curriculum studies and social studies education would like to achieve in order to build a just society.

In light of this, as Pinar (2011) suggested, to study and to become educated in the present moment, we must ask such critical questions as: What is our vision of the educated person? How do our curricular decisions affect children? Do we create schools as humane environments that nurture the potential of all students? Toward these questions, it is an arduous task for all concerned with teaching, curriculum, schooling, and education to provide definite answers, for these questions direct us to the knowledge production sites where knowledge, culture, and power discourse intersect and demands the commitment to address the ontological-epistemological and methodological issues constantly being contemplated to comprehend its relational didactics between theoretical underpinnings and practices (Pacheco, 2012) and between academic curriculum discourses and curriculum practices (Molnar, 1992). In this light,

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Pinar's (2011) premise about *curriculum as a complicated conversation* greatly contributes to the integration of influencing debates and tensions together. Pinar's scholarly contribution is a fruitful resource for emerging curriculum scholars and for graduate students particularly oriented to curriculum studies, teacher education, and social studies education. Thus, scholars and graduate students should recognize the difficulty of engaging in debates on various theories in the field since the state of conflicts and the search for new meanings and tensions have given the field a unique identity.

Like most other education faculty members and graduate students directly involved with curriculum studies—the academic field of education principally housed in departments of curriculum and teaching, socio-cultural foundations, educational administration, and higher education—my principal understandings in education are nurtured, challenged, confronted, and contradicted by different sets of histories, cultures, worldviews, and human experiences, which eventually come into collision with a rapidly increased international discourse in curriculum studies that is flourishing in Western, Anglo-American academia.

Positioning myself as a curriculum worker means two things. I see myself as a reflective teacher-practitioner who lives, studies, teaches, and contemplates congruently with such a collision, hoping for an awakening and self-examination through the lens of others such as university-based curriculum specialists, teacher educators, and educational policy elitists; then, I study curriculum and conduct research dealing with curriculum with exposure to current socio-cultural, historical, and political economy contexts of education, which a curriculum is variously defined among others as a scholarly field, phenomenon, and design (Johnson-Mardones, 2014). Further, curriculum becomes the contested terrain for controversial public debates. In light of this, my own struggle with how best to move from the technical-instrumental rationality discourse in the form of curriculum development to reconceptualize curriculum in more philosophical, humanistic, and artistic ways, drawing on the reconceptualist curriculum scholarship, the turn in curriculum and post-ism movements are being subjected to many scathing criticisms such as the claim that reconceptualist curriculum theorizing in social studies education is unable to put curriculum theory into classroom practice of use to teachers. My intent is that I should not give up and turn away, because I am convinced that our committed ethics and dignity of the calling informed by the international curriculum studies scholarship and global social studies discourse such as multiculturalism, democracy, and social justice, which have been rigorously studied in the field, is the right direction for approaching curriculum discourse in today's pluralistic world.

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Consequently, the meaning of curriculum theorists should be shifted from contemporary specific intellectuals who were assigned to perform an instrumental function by pushing government policy into action through the discourse of curriculum reform, more specifically in revision, decision-making, and policies (Rivera, 2011), to be curriculum workers. Pinar (1995) pointed out that curriculum theorists distanced themselves from schools and classroom practices that are a space for curriculum workers. He also stressed the reluctance of curriculum theorists to “get in bed with” curriculum workers, who have become foot soldiers in the cultural politics space as demonstrated in “the curriculum war” in curriculum studies field and “the social studies war” in social studies education. This cultural politics over knowledge production becomes a contested terrain for curriculum theorists and social studies scholars for critique and proposing alternative possibilities beyond issues on social efficiency, standardization, accountability reform, and neoliberal movements in education in the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, my intent positionality as a curriculum worker means that the mediated position between curriculum scholars and teacher-practitioners, whose curricular works are very much situated within the regional, national, and global contexts and informed by the socio-political and educational issues and inquired in a more complicated, sophisticated, interdisciplinary, and epistemological diversity in understanding curriculum for social justice, are used, in this sense, throughout this paper.

In addition, curriculum in this paper connotes what Pinar (2012) described as an interdisciplinary field where teacher education is originated as the vital platform for the expression of intellectual freedom, installing the originality of educators and learners, their critical reflexivity and deliberation, and constantly facilitating the engagement in ongoing complicated and deliberative conversation. In this paper, I will divide my discussion into two parts. First, curriculum development reform as mainstream discourse in Thai education and the struggling toward curriculum discourse for social justice: My perspectives and discussions for deliberating a complicated conversation in the curriculum field and social studies education in Thailand will be critically analyzed. Taking inspiration from Dewey’s (1998) works on experience and education, supported with *curre* and reconceptualist curriculum discourses, I acknowledge these concepts to articulate an interminable engagement with educational lived world organisms. These concepts can be helpful in critiquing the status of curriculum studies and social studies education, and in framing and on becoming a critical social actor who can propose alternative possibilities and new imaginations for reconceptualizing curriculum and education in the specific and unique contexts.

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**Curriculum Development Reform as Mainstream Discourse in Thai Education**

The Thai education ministry launched the first phase of curriculum policy reform in 1996 and the second phase reform in 2012. Since then, the curriculum reform has been put under the educational policy to enhance students' learning outcomes and educational achievement. The processes of raising education quality are organizing teaching and learning processes that instill in youth the desirable characteristics as prescribed in the goals of curriculum and learning reform. The Thai national education act of 1999 was launched in accordance with the constitution of Thailand in 1997. This education act led to the national curriculum framework influenced by standards-based curriculum reform in the U.S. and then promulgated in 2001 with the latest version in 2008. Thus, the national curriculum provides a framework for the development of school-based curriculum. Educational institutions must develop their own curriculum on the basis of substances, standards, and indicators stipulated by the Ministry of Education. Consequently, each educational institution shall formulate its own curriculum which comprises learning and essential experiences previously planned for the development of learners. These experiences must be based on the national curriculum standard (Office of the Education Council, 2013).

Having described the curriculum and learning reform situation, which concerns multiple stakeholders, most curriculum theorists have shared common understandings about the reform by referring to the research and development (R & D) as well as the follow-up assessment of the basic education curriculum of 2001 and the more updated version as the basic education core curriculum of 2008, and these processes would be supposedly accomplished by developing a new curriculum for improving quality education. The discourse of curriculum reform and development would continue like this and become rhetorical discourse for Thai educational reform. In this vein, I have witnessed that not many curriculum theorists have sensed, realized, or dared to criticize the hidden hegemony and status quo which has been exercised through the discourse of educational reform. Based on their understandings, this national curriculum reform will be responsive with the national economic growth and social development plan concerning a human capital approach and a policy emphasis of the Ministry of Education in developing children and youth toward the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In addition, to promote the effectiveness of the curriculum, educational research has been conducted and focused on teaching and learning innovations such as constructivism, active learning, project and problem-based approaches and brain-based instruction, education management catered for specialized and gifted children, inculcation methods for ethical values, and inclusion of educational inquiry in classroom action research,

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along with research on student-centered educational models. After the curriculum was implemented in schools nationwide for five years, the Office of Basic Education Commission's curriculum development department would conduct an analysis of limitations and weaknesses of the implemented curriculum. Ongoing monitoring, assessment, and research will be continued over the years for improving the effectiveness of the curriculum.

Based on the findings reported by the Thai Education ministry, the major limitations of the curriculum in the past were concluded to be as follows. First, the formulation of the curriculum by central authorities neither reflected nor responded to the needs of students, schools, and provincial cities. Second, curriculum development and the educational outcome of mathematics and sciences including STEM-based subjects as well as foreign language failed to develop leaders in these fields. Therefore, teaching and learning procedures needed to be improved for increasing problem-solving competence, creativity, and disposition appropriated to learning in mathematics, science and technology, and foreign languages. Third, the application of the curriculum failed to foster the foundations of critical thinking, to create learning procedures in the management of life skills, and to enable learners to effectively tackle rapid changes in social and economic areas (Department of Curriculum and Instruction Development, 2002).

Due to these limitations and weaknesses of *curriculum as the educational system*, the Ministry of Education operated by the educational policy elites made further revisions and implemented the new curriculum by reproducing educational reform discourse claiming the autonomy for reforming curriculum and education for the betterment of the nation (Jatuporn & Wattanatorn, 2014). The new curriculum is thought to better respond to the need for improving the teaching approaches of teachers and learning achievements of students, to promote skills and creativity, and to foster attitudes for lifelong learning among Thai people.

By positioning the political economy of Thai curriculum reform, I have come to recognize the reason why the curriculum development became the mainstream educational narrative in curriculum history and theory and is currently still the powerful hegemonic discourse for conceptualizing curriculum in Thailand. Influenced by those external structures of educational reform and socio-political economy of education and reflectively mediated by my positionality as a committed curriculum worker whose personal ethics and orientation toward the conception of curriculum has been transformed for years, I have been exposed to a wealth of international curriculum discourses describing the complexities of the educational enterprise. I come to fully contemplate my learning, teaching, and curricular life, and reflect upon it with a kind of altered vision and realize that this kind of situation has taken place repeatedly over the years.

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More importantly, I begin to question: If the previous curriculum is not up-to-date or contains ineffective results revealed in the empirical research, should the curriculum just be developed, revised, evaluated, improved, or reformed for more quality education? More issues raised are: Should we limit our attempts to the quality knowledge and skills demanded by the competitive capitalist-neoliberal world? Are we not concerned about their ability to apply the high-quality knowledge and other obtained competence in thoughtful, reflective, critical, and practical ways in order to create quality life in their existing socio-cultural, historical, and political contexts? All of these concerns that I have engaged in, consciously reflected upon, and contemplated become my nexuses in curriculum and social studies inquiry. An emergent curriculum worker like myself who is nurtured, cultivated, and has contemplated through life experiences has begun to grow in subsequent years with more reading, writing, and critical reflection, eventually becoming a focus of my professional identity, whereas the language and discourse of the technical-instrumental rationality framework and the curriculum development discourse for school efficiency and effectiveness has gained national acceptance in Thai curriculum studies and social studies education.

In accordance with the discourse on curriculum development and reform, public reports and research papers significantly contribute to the construction of the curriculum development model and quality education aligned with the neoliberal and neo-conservative principle of schooling and educational policy reform. To achieve this, quality education is definitely the result of a curriculum; in other words, a curriculum is a necessary prerequisite for a quality education (Grundy, 1987). A systematic process of constructing a curriculum will help in keeping the curriculum on the same track as the development of the society and the nation. Consequently, teachers will be instrumental in translating the national curriculum to classroom practices. Based on the national education act, teachers are provided the professional roles in making decisions at school and classroom levels. They are trusted with the responsibility to develop their school-based curriculum. Their participation in curriculum development can also enhance their profession. In reality, however, teachers struggle to develop a curriculum because they perceive themselves as primarily curriculum users, not curriculum designers. They teach by following prescribed textbooks and materials suggested by the Ministry of Education. Some of them may not have enough experience to design their class curriculum in compliance with the national education standards. In addition, teachers who have no opportunity to participate in workshops on curriculum development may not understand or become confused regarding how a curriculum is designed and implemented, or why it needs to be uniquely designed at the school-based level. Therefore, in real situations, it is not an easy task for teachers to develop a curriculum

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even though it is essential for teachers to develop their professional capacity to design a school-based curriculum. Ornstein and Hunkins (2014) proposed that necessary components for developing a curriculum are contents, experiences, criteria for selecting experiences, and the relationships of content and experiences. In reports on using the new curriculum in pilot schools throughout Thailand, researchers suggested some aspects of teachers' understanding to develop essential competencies to implement student-centered curriculum and instruction, focusing on the basic education core curriculum. These aspects included new knowledge, teaching and learning strategies, integrated teaching, assessment and evaluation, mentoring, and classroom action research.

The situations described above can be found in Thailand and many countries in South East Asia, the curriculum of which has largely been subjected to design, develop, implement, and evaluate based on the mainstream language of technical-scientific curriculum development that has influenced the field of education and teacher education for more than six decades (Rivera, 2011). Those influential impacts on curriculum studies and social studies could be historically investigated back to the recontextualized and rearticulated educational policy processes administered by the national policy elites who looked to the West and appropriately and selectively adopted the educational reform models to their local contexts since the post-Cold War and decolonization era (Kim, 2010). This historical fact is often evident in Thailand, where the curriculum development model reflects the powerful contemporary curriculum discourse leading to educational reform and curriculum development focusing on content and learning organization, efficiency, and outcomes, addressing the needs stipulated by increasing changes in Thailand among the developed countries in the West (Jatuporn & Wattanatorn, 2014). All of these are the critical reasons why the major tasks of curriculum development are aligned with the demands of curriculum design, development, implementation, and evaluation. This technocratic curriculum development model has been a monopolistic force and has contributed to a stagnant status that discourages the advancement and internationalization of global curriculum discourses such as democracy, multiculturalism, and social justice (McKernan, 2008).

### **The Struggle Toward Curriculum Understanding Discourse for Social Justice**

The context in the Curriculum and Instruction (C&I) department throughout Thailand is one of the important factors of limited exposure to the contemporary internationalization of curriculum discourses. In a similar vein, the social studies education program has been disciplinary, organized under the administration of the curriculum and instruction department. This means that most social studies educators have been affiliated with the curriculum and instruction department. In

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effect, the administrative organization both in terms of academic disciplines and specialized educators who are assigned and responsible for curriculum development, teaching, research, and academic services are the same.

Furthermore, graduate students in curriculum and instruction and social studies education have been exposed to few seminal academic texts in curriculum studies and social studies education. I personally suppose that this factor might stem from their limited exposure to the Thai version of curriculum theory textbooks, which have almost all been translated from the original English versions of prominent curriculum theorists such as Charles Bobbitt, Ralph Tyler, Hilda Taba, David Pratt, and others, as well as academic articles which presented only the curriculum development model. More significantly, most of the Thai policy elites and curriculum specialists who produced curriculum theory textbooks during those times were professional state-based technocrats and educational administrators responsible for modernizing Thailand through education and schooling reform. That is the reason why they appropriately selected only technical and instrumental aspects of curriculum development models and translated them into a Thai version. The documents, therefore, contain information on how to develop curriculum but lack historical, philosophical, and ideological foundations of curriculum theories.

In terms of professional degree, most of the faculty members in the C&I department, like their graduate students, received their doctoral education in Thailand. Those who experienced international degrees in curriculum studies are not affiliated with the curriculum department of regional universities; they mostly work in the large comprehensive research universities in Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand, and some of them work in the ministry of education. At this crucial point, it is interesting to note that curriculum theorists who obtained doctoral degrees in the field of curriculum studies, though predominantly from the United States, focused their inquiries into curriculum development and instructional design rather than approaching curriculum understanding. Therefore, the research in the field of curriculum is lagging behind critical issues and controversies in contemporary education emerging from the public spheres. Faculty members in the C&I department still rely on the curriculum development discourse which strongly focused on the instrumentalist and mechanistic practices.

Research on curriculum development and instructional design, on the one hand, is still the predominant discourse for curriculum reform and school effectiveness. Graduate students would be similarly guided to conduct research focusing on student achievement prescribed in the national curriculum and desirable characteristics required for students and generations to come in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The final outcomes of this research will be the model of curriculum and

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instructional design that was assumed to be generally applicable to other similar schooling contexts.

However, not all educators agree with what should be approached in curriculum research. As the nature of curriculum, most confusions and disagreements emerge from the theoretical ambiguities rooted in the subtle contexts in which curriculum is extensively discussed (Dupreez & Simmonds, 2014). In addition, scholars outside the field held various perspectives toward a curriculum which lacked a definite meaning and then could lead to confusion for students inquiring into curriculum, whereas, in international curriculum studies and social studies education, it has been evidenced that curriculum scholars and social studies educators accepted the ambiguities as a sign of dynamic vitality (Pinar, 2012). In the Thai case, to compromise the tensions between curriculum scholars and scholars outside the field, research on curriculum development and instructional design is considered to be the most appropriate research inquiry into curriculum because educators view that successful education and curriculum requires careful and systematic planning. So, they have come to recognize that without serious planning, confusions and conflicts are likely to characterize educational activity. They originated curriculum development strategies by formulating master plans prior to creating or implementing a program for students. Certainly, it is inconceivable that a curriculum can be conceived without any consideration in regard to goals, content, learning experiences, methods, materials, and evaluation.

Under this condition, there is an attempt to challenge the curriculum development by a range of curriculum workers and practitioners who have devoted their professional time studying and designing curriculum under other frameworks of curriculum (Thongthew, 2011). It is especially interesting to note that those committed to reconceptualizing curriculum are mostly people outside the scholarly fields of education, and they are oriented in their educational ideologies, perspectives, and praxis toward transformative education grounded in critical and radical democracy for transforming the society.

In stark contrast to this research phenomenon is the curriculum understanding discourse I experienced as a visiting scholar in a curriculum studies and social studies education program in one of the largest public schools of education in the Midwestern United States. I was exposed to education and curricular discourses in both professional contexts and in general communication with graduate students and faculty members in broad fields of education. For me, those earliest insights shifting from “curriculum development” to “understanding curriculum” took place during my junior year of study required by the doctorate degree in curriculum and instruction,

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when I was a doctoral student in my mid-20s who had chances to study and had rich conversations with an alumna of the curriculum studies program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and now a retired education faculty of Chulalongkorn University. She discussed alternative curriculum paradigms in curriculum inquiry as well as alternative approaches to conducting curriculum studies research that moves beyond the technical-instrumental scientific approach to curriculum construction. Furthermore, what permanently changed my conception of education, curriculum, teaching, and schooling was a year-long course in socio-cultural contexts for curriculum development. This course emphasized critical and transformative theory as well as interpretative approaches in understanding curriculum. These powerful descriptive frameworks revealed and made clear to me what was invisible, hidden, unspoken, suppressed, and marginalized, especially in terms of education, curriculum, pedagogy, and schooling. This was my first contact with the contemporary discourses in curriculum which have shaped and influenced the field for many decades, but few educators in Thailand are exposed to this scholarship.

For one-and-a-half academic years, I was awakened by intensively reading seminal texts in curriculum studies and social studies education and went further to engage in the work of postmodern and poststructuralist critics of curriculum, teaching, and schooling. These are not only curriculum scholars but include international philosophers and educators such as Maxine Greene, Michael Apple, Elliot Eisner, William Pinar, William Reynolds, Henry Giroux, Joe Kincheloe, and Peter McLaren, to name but a few. Their shared perspectives on curriculum and knowledge production, which involved a living organism opposing a machine that is precise and orderly and cannot be precisely planned, was a groundbreaking idea and became an important resource for me as I drew upon these ideas in conjunction with my curricular experiences to help me contribute to the curriculum studies and social studies education in Thailand. I also started writing previews and academic articles relating critical social studies and history education and competing discourses in the field, both in Thai and English. I have gradually learned that it is not an easy task to convince education scholars about my perspectives in approaching the curriculum; some of the articles were harshly questioned by readers who seemed displeased by my non-technical approach to conceptualizing curriculum, which makes curriculum research inappropriate and unprofessional. Since then, my personal inquiry in curriculum and social research has significantly shifted from “curriculum development” to “understanding curriculum.” I have realized that the contemporary discourses on curriculum are no longer to provide technical-scientific curriculum planning, development, implementation, and evaluation. Thus, curriculum discourse for social justice in curriculum theory and social studies education could be

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achieved by the praxis of an ethical and committed curriculum worker who perceives themselves as a critical agent in their educational and cultural politics space.

### **Conclusion**

By acknowledging the concept of “*currere*” proposed by Pinar (1981), curriculum will be explored as a *regressive* by adopting a process of reflective introspection to our personal life journeys, a *progressive* by looking forward to an imagined future, an *analytical* by studying the historical past, contemporary situations, and future, and a *synthesis* by merging our experiences with the larger contextualization of cultural, historical, and political economy of its society. The articulation of this notion enriched my entanglement with our educational organisms, one that could be conducive for analyzing, criticizing, and imagining the status of curriculum studies and social studies education by formulating the ever-changing educational world.

In Thailand and many countries in South East Asia, these academic fields of education are still under the various forms of technical rationality at all levels of education. As curriculum workers, we must recognize the reason why the language of curriculum development has been the mainstream discourse in curriculum history and is still currently the powerful discourse for approaching curriculum (Lim & Apple, 2018). These premises have inspired my inquiry into curriculum and helped construct the identity of a curriculum worker who was once naïve in the field and gradually became a critical curriculum worker. Looking back through my own experiences and enthusiastically committing to curriculum inquiry, as well as struggling with how best to move from curriculum development to curriculum understanding, have shaped and changed my professional and personal identity.

We believe that curriculum workers should engage in complicated conversations in curriculum and social knowledge through criticisms and debates, which are the lifeblood of curriculum studies and social studies education. Being under the hegemony of educational reform, education quality, standardization, accountability, and school effectiveness, among others, it is incumbent upon curriculum workers to assure that the directives of the educational institutions that address those things within the system be fulfilled. They should also settle the issues pertaining to the individual, community, and social justice (Callejo-Perez, 2011). The contemporary society requires education weaving throughout the curriculum opportunities, so that learners can think critically, concomitant with the contemplation of their values and beliefs about schooling and education. Critical reflection on such a paradigm has the potential to cause individuals to change their recurrently entrenched normative beliefs about education and related

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issues (Null, 2011). It also serves as a catalyst to promote radical social change. Thus, it is my hope that we will liberate curriculum, whether in forms of our thoughts or practices, and act seriously toward that liberation.

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