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# Complexity *and* Complicity: Quality(s) and/or Effectiveness in Teacher Education

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## Abstract

The period spanning 2001 to 2015 could best be characterized in the words “shock and awe” in the United States of America. During this tumultuous time, the public good was placed under increasingly austere measures as a direct result of war, widespread financial speculation, and crash of the financial, investment, and real estate market(s). Subsequently, a banking industry bailout of epic proportions - shouldered disproportionately by average American taxpayers - led to political upheavals, and an increasingly divided body politic. Public education was severely impacted.

With the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002) school districts were placed under audit and individual schools were often labelled as failures. Congress attempted to fix the law in 2007, yet reauthorization stalled. In 2008, the economic crises compounded the educational impasse with a growing disparity of financial resources, urban neglect and decay.

The inauguration of President Barack Obama ushered in the *American Recovery and Restoration Act* (2009). This act was intended to stimulate the economy, and it did at least save some of the teaching jobs that would otherwise have been cut as local and state revenues were collapsing under the strain. However, a new paradigm also emerged in which funding to the schools would be shifted from need-based to accountability-based and a lottery system called *Race to the Top* (2009) changed teachers and teacher education dramatically.

**Keywords:** Teacher education, education reform, professionalism.

## Introduction

The period spanning 2001 to 2015 could best be characterized in the United States of America as one of “shock and awe” wherein the public good was smashed due to two undeclared wars, widespread financial speculation and a subsequent crash of the real estate market which caused a bail out of epic proportions shouldered disproportionately by the average American taxpayers of the financial industry. Indeed it is not secret that this period was coupled with tax breaks for the wealthiest and the continued amassing of large fortunes by the so-called FIRE<sup>1</sup> industries even throughout the collapse and recovery.

Public education had already been placed under audit in the form of the *No Child Left Behind* in 2002, with schools being characterized as having failed, and by 2008, with the reauthorization of the law having stalled in congress, the economic crises added to the underlying problem of growing disparity of financial resources, urban neglect and decay. With the election of President Barack Obama, the *American Restoration and Recovery Act* saved some of the teaching jobs which were slated to be cut as local and state revenues collapsed under the

strain of the bailout, but also ushered in a new paradigm in which funding to the schools would be shifted from that which was based on need to one which was supposedly based on accountability and ultimately became a lottery called *Race to the Top*. Indeed under this era of *Race to the Top*, many of the nation's schools felt like they were "running for the money"<sup>2</sup> while occupied by a largely hostile force.

It is also a period where certainty has given way to a great deal of *complexity*, a term I specifically borrow from curriculum theorist William Doll. Doll's notion is an interesting one, taken literally I believe, is that modernism is ebbing if not collapsing around us and society, especially in the form of the schools is signalling in many ways that what worked in the modern period, no longer does so. Stated another way, Doll artfully noted that the "time has passed" for the Tyler Rationale.

One example is that the beginning of the end of modern ways of assessment and evaluation can be imagined: no more shared, intended learning outcomes; the collapse of the massive standardized testing culture, and sanctions for failing to meet the behavioural *objectives* ... the features of the same audit culture as I mentioned above. In its place is expected to be, and apparently widely encouraged by business and government a naked competition for diminishing resources, a veritable race to the bottom.

Doll's characterization of *qualities*<sup>3</sup>... is interesting and generative, bringing alternately to mind "quality" (as in the curriculum) "qualified" (as in the "highly qualified teacher") and the "qualitative" (as opposed to the quantitative). But Doll's use of the term suggests that by *qualities*, in place of behavioural objectives, what we are witness to is not a divergence, or clear break from the past, but the beginning of a struggle between what is observable, and what are *competencies*.

The call for even more assessments, yet another attempt to nationalize the curriculum, and the raising once again of vouchers, merit pay, and attacks on teacher unions ... is evidence not of victory of the worst anti-education excesses, but indicate, rather, a desperate attempt to rekindle ideas whose time have also passed. An even more recent call to place the entire higher education system under audit for demonstrating graduate success in order to receive financial aid indicates the tip of the iceberg for continuing the downward spiral toward education catastrophe.

## 1. Commercial Club Curriculum

In *Defending public education from corporate takeover* (2013) the argument is that commercial club or "civic groups" have always been behind the major educational reform efforts. Largely pursuing a path of curriculum developed by and for the interest of big business, the words "commercial club curriculum" serve as a metaphor and a reality. The story of the Commercial Club of Chicago (founded in 1877) begins in the late nineteenth century when industrial titans of the age set about to create a "dual-track" school system; one for the workers and the other for the managers, organized and managed under tight-fisted mayoral-control. The industrial titans themselves would send their children off to posh

private schools on the East Coast. Justified under this social engineering design was the rationalization that progress called for an effective sorting mechanism, and this mechanism would be the standardized test. Administrative progressives exerted their authority and control using “scientific management” principles of the day, shifting teachers around and aiming to maximize time, space and resources along the principle of teaching as a profession and teacher education by elite pedagogical institutions. Administrative progressives at the top of the higher education chain were tasked with assigning the curriculum and administering . . . from the central office of the superintendent. Teachers deemed unqualified would be displaced from their neighborhood schools and directed to secure further education at Teachers College (at a cost the progressive administrators surely must have known was more than working-class women of diverse ethnic backgrounds could afford). A new “scientific management” curriculum was settled upon and high school educated teachers were replaced by university educated and professionally credentialed teachers (Murphy, 1990).

Counter to the administrative progressives were the early teacher unionists and *pedagogical* progressives (the developmentalists), radicals in their day, for offering that the child should be the “centre” of curriculum and pedagogical formation and that teachers had a say in their working conditions:

the distinguishing characteristic of the progress made in education in the last fifty years has been the demand for the freeing of the child. (Murphy, 1990).

In spite of unionists, pedagogical progressives, and other critical educators, for much of the modern period curriculum development, classroom instruction, education practice, policy and reform has been “dreamt of by others” (Pinar, 2004). Increasingly curriculum development resides under the purview of business stakeholders and social engineers interested in *determining* the future.

For example, the Commercial Club of Chicago continues to publish reports. *Still Left Behind*, (2009), for example, is similar to *Vocational education in Europe: Report to the Commercial Club of Chicago* (1912). The club’s Civic Committee on Education has great influence over the Chicago Public Schools Board of Education - *appointed* by the Mayor - and remains the vital force behind the radical restructuring of the CPS school system with in recent years the closure of 50+ schools before the Autumn 2013 school start.

### 1.1 No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

...two sides were drawn with competing education reform agendas. In *Sticks, stones, and ideology: The discourse of reform in teacher education*, Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Mary Kim Fries provide an illuminating template depicting the political divisiveness between the two sides of educational reform: “professionalization” of the teaching profession and alignment with standards and ... “deregulation” ... opening up the teaching profession to alternative teacher training organizations, or what has come to be called “alternative certification.” Emerging from this deep divide was ... NCLB<sup>4</sup>.

With NCLB the standardized test would be used not only to judge student performance, but as a literal report card on the school itself, thereby justifying that while education was largely a “state” matter administered to by local authority and initiative, with the federal government effectively determining winners and losers, with reconstitution and ultimately closure of schools the penultimate consequence

of failing to move the children to the next level. The audit culture that has come down, labeling schools, teachers and kids as failures and sanctioning and shaming, has done irreparable harm to the morale, conditions and the experience of many schools, communities and families.

The key language of *No Child Left Behind* is founded in this passage:

...the law calls for ... teachers to “have the necessary subject matter, knowledge and teaching skills in the academic subjects [to be able] to help students meet challenging State student academic achievement standards.”<sup>5</sup>

### **1.2 Race to the Top/Common Core State Standards**

The *Race to the Top* initiative punishes schools and teachers; it ties teacher effectiveness being to pay-for-performance schemes, encouraging cheating (in Atlanta for example) and abuse of the validity and integrity of testing.

Race to the Top undermines public education by privileging charter school experiments over the neighborhood school. Indeed as results kept rolling in that charter schools are clearly not performing as well as the average public school (CREDO, 2009), there are also the disturbing segregative effects of charterization (especially of special education-designated students who are overrepresented in public schools compared with the charters). The Obama administration ratcheted up the stakes under *Race to the Top*, with more tests, and even tests for teachers, as well as cutting funds to the schools that were over tested and under resourced. In a cruel display, Obama and Duncan cheered the closing of schools, the indiscriminate firing of teachers, social workers and custodial staff, all under the guise of a “tough love” or “no excuses” approach. All the while, the brainchild of the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) conspired to place the entire nation under “Common Core” State Standards, really a national curriculum, to raise the standards and expectations of students in schools across the nation. The Obama administration used waivers from the unpopular NCLB law to “leverage” compliance, undermine tenure, link pay for performance, and lift caps on charters, force states to accept Common Core State Standards (or a reasonable facsimile). The whole point of *Race to the Top* was to replace “needs based” funding with “incentives”. *Race to the Top* ushered in an era of competition, but not amongst equals, and greed in the interest of not being closed ... truly a race to the bottom.

Race to the top changes the “qualified” to “effective” as in Highly Effective Teacher, see the *ESEA Blueprint for Reform* ‘rewarding’ excellent teachers, providing funds to support and track those teachers, and expanding on the pathways for teacher preparation:

**Effective teachers and principals.** We will elevate the teaching profession to focus on recognizing, encouraging, and rewarding excellence. We are calling on states and districts to develop and implement systems of teacher and principal evaluation and support, and to identify effective and highly effective teachers and principals on the basis of student growth and other factors. These systems will inform professional development and help teachers and principals improve student learning. In addition, a new program will support ambitious efforts to recruit, place, reward, retain, and promote effective teachers and principals and enhance the profession of teaching. (A Blueprint for Reform, 2010).

As stated by Price and Ross, this is a significant departure from the notion of professionalism, of the higher education community determining who is qualified and shifting that responsibility over to the federal government. While the reauthorization of NCLB stalled (one version has moved out of the House but is yet to be taken up in the Senate)...

... one of the suggested 'reforms' of the law did catch on, that would be the call by *the Aspen Institute*<sup>6</sup> to expand 'choice' and 'flexibility' options<sup>7</sup>, and largely to add a 'E' for effective into the HQT equation, such that the federal government would then support an HQET. Other professional organizations including the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) have joined suit, aiming to get the Congress to mandate an 'E' for 'Effective' into the nomenclature of teaching. (Price & Ross, 2011, p. 8).

### 1.3 Complicated Conversations: Teachers and Curriculum

I used a convenience sample in the broadest sense of the word, reflecting not on empirical evidence, but drawing from a diverse range of experience and experiences working with teacher education faculty and with teacher candidates over several years in a very complex organization that calls for much role re-evaluation and "shape-shifting" in order to endure the continual, on-going demand(s) of education under neoliberalism. In so doing I suggest that despite the danger of complicity with what rightly so is often characterized as the corporatist project for education which appears increasingly to reduce social space, critical thinking and complicated conversations around curriculum, there *nonetheless remain* and *continue to emerge* novel situational, temporal and conditional opportunities to reframe the role of the faculty, teacher education, and public education, let alone possibilities for students to learn and grow. I argue that we as curricularists need to lead the way in the new era and reconceptualise curriculum with a focus on qualities rather than intended learning objectives.

Three interesting anecdotes among many, many abound. The first is from a elementary, male teacher, from an urban high needs school during discussion in the FND 510 *Social Justice Perspectives on the History and Philosophy of Education*, a introduction/survey course for many of our teacher education candidates/students at our college of education; the second is a reflection from a survey from one of our teacher candidates having completed a civic engagement/service learning project in the field of the New Orleans Louisiana Recovery School District; and the third is from one of my teachers of record, who, having graduated from an residential partnership program (the partner to my university being the Academy for Urban School Leadership) found herself on a picket line protesting, among other things, reduction in force (RIFs) and school closings that would dramatically impact her own class and students.

First, the male teacher; having completed a review of different philosophies, he fully appreciated the conditional, temporal, and situational nature of knowledge:

My philosophical stance on education is encapsulated in bits and pieces of the various models; however, I primarily believe my view on education tends to lend itself most to the Post Modernist stance. I believe that knowledge should be viewed through a critical lens, and post modernism shares the same perspective as critical theory. All knowledge can be deconstructed [in order to] determine whether or not the constructs of such knowledge are in alignment with our beliefs.

The second example is taken from one of the teachers from amongst the many who had returned from our NOLA-NLU service learning trip, setting up classrooms, putting in dry wall, logging into and creating library learning systems, providing tutorials to day care workers, and essentially working to “recover” students devastated by Hurricane Katrina and the lingering aftermath:

*In the end, you recognize that you have the choice of knocking persistently, asking for favors, savoring snow balls, and singing in the rain with new friends, and that this place and time and circumstance are only temporary, the waiting perhaps made more bearable and easily tolerated just because you know you can leave soon and go back to your more comfortable home and life. It dawns on you that this has been a blessed time and most welcomed experience shared with a wonderful and spirited team—and yet there is this little voice telling you that those people who live in this neighbourhood don't always have a choice of whether or not to wait or to leave. Knowing that, you understand that you can't really go back to the way you were before.*

The third teacher having graduated from a program that supports the idea of “turning around” schools herself protesting the continued planned school closures, which led her into teaching in the first place. Her paradox is described here:

I'm out her because I think it is wrong that schools are being closed. I don't think that any school should be closed. Personally I'm a teacher, I've got 26 kids in my classroom with varying and special needs and to suggest that a school with 20 kids is underutilized (as was the case, by the unelected Chicago Board of Education) is ridiculous because that seems like a perfect number, it would allow me to move kids [forward in achievement] incredibly.

Without being too quixotic, these simple discourses/anecdotes share common features of complexity; they are grounded in the teacher's own belief system, and in their different contexts, they “evidence” a recognition of the need to actively engage in the struggle(s) over knowledge. Critical educators like teachers such as these, find themselves at the nexus of a new era, one where they will need to consider issues of advocacy and efficacy inscribed into and along with effectiveness discourse. They will need to be fully present while “navigating” education reform efforts, often not of their own making.

### **Conclusion**

This essay, along with the other essays in this presentation, has attempted to describe the context under which teaching and teacher education finds itself today; guilty (of failing to effectively teach) until proven innocent (or successful at meeting its mission, and effectively moving forward teaching and learning and enacting in our teacher/learners the knowledge, skills and dispositions so that they can impart the same on their students). Beginning with the Commercial Club Curriculum years, the public school system has been compromised, altered in such a way as to literally serve as a dual-track system where kids are fairly early on sorted into two categories: vocational and administrative. Broadly speaking, and despite much resistance by civil rights and social justice groups to reform the system so that it serves the broader interests of empowerment, enfranchisement, and upward social mobility, to often the system has served to reinforce lines of division between the haves and the have-nots. Curriculum matters; the idea that

curriculum construction can be participatory and in the broadest interests of meliorating society is not new and needs to be reinvigorated today when the expanse of wealth and “opportunity” rather than the “achievement” gap has never been greater ...

The essay continued to point out that major “current” education reform agendas such as NCLB and RTT have determined that the federal government is increasingly interested in and in the business of surveillance and monitoring of the entire education (curriculum, teaching and learning, assessment) “industry” and won’t go away soon. In other words, curriculum matters have become not only areas of profit and plunder for large scale education service corporations and contractors, but is now of primary interest to the neo-liberal regulatory state.

### Notes

1. This term is attributed to the shift in the industrial economy to a service one wherein the middle-class is largely and negatively impacted, see for example: “At the city scale, Sassen has done a lot of researches of the FIRE influences to the Global Cities, such as New York, London and Tokyo, since 1984.<sup>[4]</sup> She and a group of scholars like Feistein, argued that FIRE aggravated social inequality and polarization of these cities.” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FIRE\\_economy#cite\\_note-4](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FIRE_economy#cite_note-4)
2. Hence the name of the chapter “Racing to the top, running for the money” in my book *Defending public education from corporate takeover*, (2013).
3. Uttered during his keynote address before the *International Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies*, 2012 in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil.
4. Price, T. & Ross, H. (2011). *Race to the Top, road to where? Public education and the highly effective teacher*. Chicago: National Louis University.
5. Ibid.
6. Charged by the federal government with suggesting changes to Congress for reauthorization of NCLB. See their document and findings at: Commission on No Child Left Behind (Aspen Institute). (2007). *Beyond NCLB: fulfilling the promise to our nation's children*. Washington, D.C.: Aspen Institute.
7. Ibid. Although reversing the order of the law’s sanctions, from ‘choice’ to ‘supplemental services.’

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