

# **Studies in the Social from the Margins:**

## **Deweyan Considerations for Practice**

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### **Introduction**

Questions about the nature and function of the curriculum in public schools may (and do) seem technical on the surface, especially under the current paradigm of standards-based accountability movement. That said, a variety of curriculum theory traditions invite us to consider more seriously the cultural positioning of the curriculum, and especially in public schools of a liberal democracy. Such a consideration opens the door to a host of questions about the relation of the curriculum to democracy, diversity, power, discourse, ideology, fights for social justice, the public, and the public good. In this article I use narrative identity theory to argue that a social studies curriculum that centers a multicultural strand of critical democracy is of crucial importance to any liberal democracy like the United States, a country which foundational history and contemporary reality cannot be understood away from the “problem” of the “other.” I then use John Dewey’s pragmatism to propose some most needed reconstructions in the social studies curriculum.

### **Narrative Identity**

Contemporary research in psychology of identity strongly suggests the importance of stories we tell to ourselves and to others in the construction and direction of our identity (for example see Adler, 2012; Hammack, 2008/2011; McAdams, 2001; McAdams & Guo, 2015; McAdams & McLean, 2013; McAdams & Pals, 2006; and McLean & Pasupathi, 2007). Human identity is by nature “storied” and narratable (Adler, 2012, p. 383), and our autobiographical stories make us

what we are since “we are made up of, engage in, and are surrounded by stories” (McLean, K. C., Pasupathi, M., & Pals, J. L., 2007, p. 262). Stories are then the stuff of identity, and it is out of “the episodic particulars of autobiographical memory [that] a person may construct and internalize an evolving and integrative story for life, or what psychologists today call a narrative identity (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 233).

While some scholars are optimistic about the ability of the individual to achieve of a “healthy narrative” of identity that weaves together “reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future” (Adler, 2012, p. 368) in order to “gradually develops a broader and more integrative narrative identity” (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 233) and provide purpose, unity, coherence, meaning, and continuity to the experience of the cultural actor across time and space (McAdamas, 2001); others (for example Hammack, 2008) invite us to consider that identity of the 21<sup>st</sup> globalized world could be fragmented, the node of a diversity of competing, contested, and contradictory discourses, and the terrain for loss of personal and cultural meaning. In both cases, personal narratives of identity are always situated in and situating larger social, economic, political, historical, racial/ethnic, gender, linguistic, religious, and geographical narratives (e.g. McAdams, 2001; McAdams & Pals, 2006). They are ideological, influencing and influenced by wider cultural discourse and its master narratives fused with issues of power, politics, conflict, and legitimacy (for example see Hammack, 2008, p. 230).

### **Narratives, Multiculturalism, Democracy, and the Curriculum**

Narrative identity theory has major implications for curriculum and pedagogical decision making, and especially in identity-oriented subjects like social studies. As White explains, “humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives...The fundamental idea of critical inquiry in social studies and history education is that education is life

and experience as well. Therefore, education is the construction and reconstruction of the human story or endeavor, hopefully within an equity and social justice framing, for the betterment of society” (2015, pp. 12-13). Perhaps the best way to educate children is then to listen to their stories and those of their parents and immediate communities, to understand their “experience” as John Dewey would argue.

In this vein, let me start by sharing some snapshots of identity of self, family, and immediate community of the author of this article, an Arab Muslim higher education academic. Before attempting to do so, I have to note that I am totally aware these snapshots are written from a standpoint (our standpoint) and may not speak through and to a variety of others. Still, and as Dewey would certainly agree, it is with such (auto)biographical insights that a true contextualized “science” of education starts and that authentic growth, participation, and democracy flourishes.

I assume the year was about 1981. My entire country was in the midst of an atrocious civil war that has been going on for six years now, and about to be invaded by a bordering nation in a year or so. Our family of two parents and four children was financially suffering a great deal, especially that both my parents came from underprivileged socioeconomic stratum. All that said, my father worked two, and at times three, jobs to help us attend private schools (to me this stopped by the end of elementary school). As a nine year old child, I hope it comes as no surprise to you that I was mostly oblivious to all these hardships. A child who is showing visible signs of academic talent, I was mostly worried about more important things like making sure our neighbor does not catch us playing soccer in his soccer field-like parking lot or convincing my mother to allow us to go have fun by the river as long as we come back home by sunset. It was in this environment and at this time that I had my first educational study in the social.

It was toward the end of a rainy school day when the school principal came in to give students some “gifts,” a word used to describe donations that were provided by a variety of organizations to help ease the scarcity that was at the time felt. Most of the students in the class were distributed a navy shirt and pair of pants and what seemed to me like a comfortable pair of running shoes. Very few, including myself, were not. Rushing into the door of our one room residence that afternoon, I was already asking my mother about this indecipherable experience. She succinctly replied that I should not think about it and that these gifts “are not for people like us.” It took me a few more years to understand my mother’s comment and many others rife with like experiences to better discern my identity as a dweller of a cultural margin and the evils that come with such a dwelling.

Back to the present. One of our conscious encounters with our seven year old child’s instruction in the social within an education setting happened during this school year. Having spent the entire summer immersed in a different culture and language, our child started his school year at a slower pace than expected. We did not see this as a serious problem since we work hard with him at home and we had no doubt he will catch up soon. His highly dedicated teacher however had a (strong!) different opinion. She three times tried to convince us she wants him to attend morning tutorials to help bridge this summer gap...and we finally agreed. Of course, our son ended up being in the principal’s Math and Reading club. But much more importantly, he had a tear in his eye when asked if he is going to miss this teacher next year. I guess because he so much appreciated this educative exercise in bringing the marginal (in this case linguistic) to the center. During the same year, my older son was assigned a novel reading for his social studies class that his teacher claimed (in a formal email sent to all parents in the

class) represents a geographical area spreading from west North Africa to Asia's Far East. The focus on this novel was about life under Islamic terrorism.

Evading a variety of symbolic and material segregations and oppressions in an area of the world that is lately sinking into more and more cultural darkness, our hope is to pursue the American dream. To us, this dream is not about going from rags to riches (more and more difficult under the new capitalism). In fact, this dream is about living in a multicultural democracy where margins are as central as the "core" and where the rule of democratic law (versus naked power) is the primary source of authority. This dream is so dear to our heart because we learned about the importance of democracy firsthand...by experiencing its absence, and our children are already multicultural democratic citizens of the world, and what they need is a curriculum that will bring them to their multicultural democratic identity.

Of course, with the many stereotyping essentializations taking place today in American culture of Muslim Arab identity through the many distorting media, the packaged forms of popular culture, the fierce American (presidential!) politics, and even some school curricula with nativist tendencies (for example, see Sensoy, 2014, p. 290), and in view of the rise for some time now of terrorism in many Muslim Arab countries and elsewhere, this specific multicultural curricular task seems to be of some difficulty. That said it helps here to remember that the history of democratic struggles in and for American public schools has never been easy, and this never stopped cultural fights from being won and democracy from being promoted. Otherwise, the curriculum ends up being, as it historically had been, one among many other cultural "literature[s] of escape" (Dewey & Bentley, 1949, p. 182). Should we accept social studies to be broadly defined as "a course of study that deals with human relationships and the way society works" (Merriam-Webster Online), our bias is for a social studies curriculum that centers

democracy, multiculturalism, and a relentless fight against cultural oppressions and segregations. This is the narrative standpoint from which the argument below is made.

### **The Curriculum as Culture**

In these times of standards-based educational “reform,” inquiry about the nature of the curriculum seems to be at best extraneous and at worst meaningless. Nested in web of quantifications, standards, measurement, audits, and punitive accountability, the school curriculum is presented to its audience as a fixed body of delineated knowledge, skills, and dispositions, and very little in it is left for chance or improvising, let alone serious critical reflection, negotiation, or reconstruction. “Instead of employing school knowledge to complicate our understanding of ourselves and the society in which we live, teachers are forced to ‘instruct’ students to mime others’ (i.e., textbook authors’) conversations, ensuring that countless classrooms are filled with forms of ventriloquism rather than intellectual exploration, wonder, and awe” (Pinar, 2004, p. 186). White (2015) argues that this case is especially true for the social studies curriculum. Such a curriculum, White argues, is more on the side of conservative constancy than any critical transformative project of education. The dominant trend in social studies education has been “transmitting essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions so as to ensure the status quo” (p. 2). Such essential knowledge usually “tell[s] the stories of the white males heroes of history and provide lip service to the other in the form of celebratory months. Many stories are missing. We often deaden social studies and history to the point of meaningless pabulum” (White, 2015, p. 1). Cultural hegemony and a narrow conception of nationalism and exceptionalism leave little space for questioning and critique as “we often place everything into neat little categories so as to make sense of a difficult world. And these categories only serve to hinder” (White, 2015, p. 2).

All that said the history of curriculum theory serves as a constant reminder of the curriculum's multilayeredness, complexity, and evasion of exact definition (for example, see Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2006; Ross 1997; 2001; 2006; 2014). As William F. Pinar beautifully puts it, the curriculum is at its best when being "an ongoing, if complicated, conversation" (2004, p. 188), one that is unpredictable, emergent, and constantly (re)created.

Approaches to curriculum theory are multiple, reflecting the field's many convolutions. On the surface, the curriculum could, as it is today, be defined in a superficial, narrow, and functionalist language of measurable objectives and high-stakes assessment. Still, this is only one language among many. Curriculum theory for example has time and again drawn from theoretical frameworks from philosophy and the social sciences to better inform our understanding of the curriculum's positioning within both public schools and broader society (for example, see Pinar et al., 2006). At an even deeper level, curriculum theory has constantly framed the curriculum in its wider lived culture, opening the curricular conversation about identity, ideology, politics, power, democracy, ethics, and the nature of the good. As Ladson-Billings and Brown remind us, "curricula are not static, neutral documents of fact but rather are dynamic, ideological, cultural artifacts that do something" (2008, p. 153). Drawing from the historical, political, economic, legal, racial, ethnic, gender, sexual identity, religious, linguistic, and geographical dimensions of wider culture has widen our understanding of the curriculum and its cultural (mal)functions (for example, see Pinar et al., 2006; Ross, 1997; 2001; 2006; 2014).

Culture then is at the heart of the curriculum. For example, Ross, Mathison, and Vinson (2014), and drawing from work by Peter H. Martorella (1996), outline five cultural functions of the social studies curriculum. The first is citizenship transmission. The focus here is on cultivating a nationalistic patriotic student identity through "the teaching and learning of discrete,

factual pieces of information drawn primarily from the canon of Western thought and culture” (p. 26). While multicultural diversity is “downplayed, ignored, or actively challenged...cultural and social unity are proclaimed and praised” (pp. 26-27). The second is training the student in the social sciences. The focus here is “mastering social science concepts, generalizations, and processes to build a knowledge base for later learning” (p. 27). Rooted in work by John Dewey, the third cultural function of the social studies curriculum is reflective inquiry. The focus here is on “relevant problem solving, or meaningful decision making within a specific sociopolitical context,” that of liberal democratic capitalism (p. 28). The fourth is informed social criticism. Rooted in the work of social reconstructionists like George S. Counts (1932), the focus here is on exposing and resisting cultural oppressions including but not limited to classism, sexism, and racism. Under this tradition, students are provided “opportunities for an examination, critique, and revision of past traditions, existing social practices, and modes of problem solving” (p. 30). The last function of the social studies curriculum the authors describe is personal development “grounded in the idea that effective democratic citizenship involves understanding one’s freedom to make choices as well as one’s obligation and responsibility to live with their ultimate outcomes” (p. 30). In a similar vein, Schiro (2013) describes four dominant cultural curriculum ideologies: scholar academic, social efficiency, learner centered, and social reconstruction. And Ellis (2013) describes yet another four: progressive, learner-centered, society-centered, and knowledge-centered.

### **Multicultural by Birth**

The curriculum then is a cultural phenomenon, a sprout which roots, sustenance, and pathologies are grounded in the experiential ecology of the variety of cultural actors. Properly negotiating the curriculum requires then founding it in a wider theory of culture, a cultural theory



of the curriculum (for example relevant to social studies, see Ladson-Billings, 2001). This cultural basing of the curriculum is peculiarly relevant in the field of social studies, a field which subject matters (Anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, sociology, and the humanities) have obvious cultural tendencies (for a definition of social studies see the National Council for the Social Studies).

The question now becomes: which cultural theory should inform our understanding of the social studies curriculum in 21<sup>st</sup> century America? A purpose statement proposed by the National Council for the Social Studies seems to be a good precursor here: “the primary purpose of social studies is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world.” In the rest of this article, Deweyan pragmatism, a cultural theory which centers issues of diversity and communal democracy, is used to inform our understanding the social studies curriculum. Before doing this however, it will be proper to historically justify this accentuation of a multicultural version of democracy in considering the public school curriculum.

In their admirable *American Education: A History*, Wayne Urban and Jennings Wagoner (2014) beautifully capture the unremitting if complicated relationship between public education and a cultural version of democracy. Time after time in their historical oeuvre, the authors demonstrate that the body of the curriculum has always been the arena of multiple cultural struggles. As early as the first expeditions to the new world, concerns about proper education of the alien started to emerge. In a 1492 letter addressed to Queen Isabella of Spain for example, Christopher Columbus describes a proper “curriculum” suitable to a cultural other: “I assure you Your Highness that I believe that in all the world there is no better people nor better country. They love their neighbours as themselves, and have the sweetest talk in the world, and gentle,

and always with a smile. They go naked, men and women, as their mothers bore them. But...they have good manner...your Highness should feel great joy, because presently they will be Christians, and instructed in the good manners of your realms” (as quoted, p. 5).

Multiculturalism was an essential “problem” for American education from the early beginnings of the nation, and it continues to manifest itself through a variety of cultural spheres. While the movement toward more inclusive forms of American culture was not easy, it is sound to say that great gains have been made and that multiculturalism is a fact of today’s American life and its public schools. More communal forms of liberal democratic politics, neoliberal economics claiming to be rooted in expanded view of a multicultural world, federal and state policies catering for disadvantaged cultural, and more and more inclusion of a variety of groups (ethnic, racial, gender, sexual identity, religious, linguistic) that have been traditionally marginalized, all signal the receptiveness and accommodation of American culture to the very idea of diversity. The success of this movement is but a witness to the uniqueness of the American democratic experience, one that has not been replicated anywhere else in the world and which maintenance is of vital global importance especially in today’s world of mounting blind tribalism and symbolic and material violence. Keeping the multicultural conversation alive is especially important in public schools since “at its strongest, the public school was forged by coalitions of individuals and groups who worked in farm communities, villages, towns, and large cities to hammer out the differences that separated them as adults in order to provide better opportunities and a more decent and just society for their children” (Urban & Wagoner, 2014, p. 344).

### **Pragmatist Reconstructions in Social Studies**

Recognizing the intimate relation of social studies with social life and their potential capacity in supporting schools meet “the challenge of democracy,” John Dewey asks social studies educators to take seriously “the extent to which the material of the social studies...is taught simply as information about present society or is taught in connection with things that are done, that need to be done, and how to do them” (1937, p. 185). Deweyan “doing” is of course rooted in a radical version of a culturally communal democratic theory, and it is this theory that is used next to inform our understanding of the social studies curriculum in a multicultural United States.

Students should be able to approach the curriculum as a cultural process and product. They should come to an appreciation that curricular “facts” are noting but fluid handiworks of culture, and that they change as it does. And they should be able to discern the cultural foundations underpinning one version of the curriculum or another. Throughout its history, American school curriculum has served a variety of cultural goals including social indoctrination, economic reproduction, tribal isolation, personal flourishing, citizenship preparation, democratic living, social justice agendas, and most recently the preparation of “skilled” workers for a global economy. Whatever the goals are, the curriculum has always been cultural and in culture should constantly be positioned and negotiated.

Students should be given the chance to appraise all curricular knowledge claims against a version of democracy that values diversity, community, cooperation, and personal voice and growth, against “the idea of community life itself” (Dewey, 1927, p. 148). This is especially important when “only diversity makes change and progress” (Dewey, 1916, p. 96). “A critical component of education in general, and social studies and history education specifically, is to promote an understanding of diversity and the ‘story’ of humanity at home and abroad” (White,

2015, p. 2). George Herbert Mead perfectly captures the spirit of this version of democracy: “the principle which I have suggested as basic to human social organization is that of communication involving participation in the other. This requires the appearance of the other in the self, the identification of the other with the self, the reaching of self-consciousness through the other” (1934, p. 253). More recently, White (2014) argues that the democratically constructed community should be the starting point for any meaningful social studies education. According to White, education is a property of the community and should always be grounded in the public good. Elsewhere, White argues that “we live in a world made up of many texts” and that “it is essential that students and educators develop multiple literacies that will facilitate the reading of signs, symbols, and images (texts) of that world” (2015, p. 2). In the same vein, Talbert (2002, para. 1) warns against A “packaged democracy” that is dominant in social studies textbooks, curricula, and learning resources, one that “is defined in pleasing and palatable images that promote the narrow economic, political, and socio-cultural interests of corporate giants.” This form of democracy provides very little space to “critical thought and analytical inquiry about the differences between popular-democracy (i.e., freedom, majority rule, protection of minority rights, free and open elections) and market-democracy principles (i.e., unrestrained consumption, efficiency, power and access based on wealth and free/open trade).”

“Social studies should be a transformational process for both the individual and society” (White, 2015, p. 9). Students should be given the chance to judge all curricular knowledge claims through a critical cultural lens that can help uncover the variety of cultural oppressions and discriminations (by economic class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, language, geographical location, religious affiliation, political preference...). Students should come to an understanding that while disagreement of opinion is a hallmark of any liberal democracy, bigotry

is one of its greatest enemies, and they should be able to see the role of politics and ideology in the very construction of curricular knowledge. Dewey reminds us that the practice of cultural criticism is “the theory of education in its most general phases” (1916, p. 33) and that a central aim of progressive education is to “take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation [rather than] to perpetuate them” (p. 119). Otherwise, “what good is a society that won’t question itself?” (White, 2015, p. 1). Speaking of teaching civics for example, Dewey notes that “[teaching] the machinery of government is very important, but even more important is [teaching] the power that works the machinery; the nature of that power; where the power comes from” (1923, pp. 159-160). White (1999; 2011) argues for centering social justice in the very curriculum, and pedagogy of social studies education and Talbert (2009) invites an activist understanding of the role of the social studies teacher.

Against the above cultural, democratic, and critical dimensions, the curriculum should be “psychologized” (Dewey, 1902, p. 22), made relevant to the everyday life experience of the student and its potentials and difficulties. Instead of having the “child vs. the curriculum” (p. 5), as it is the case in many of today’s public schools, both the child and the curriculum should inform each other in a continuous cycle of self and social discovery and realization. Education after all is “of, by, and for experience” (Dewey, 1938, p. 14), an experience that is “the only method” (Dewey, 1925, p. 11). “A single course of studies for all progressive schools” becomes of course “out of the question” (Dewey, 1938, p. 52) since a “course of study should be a *course*; it ought to be flowing, moving thing, for its subject matter comes into continuous contact with the minds of the pupils” (Dewey, 1924, p. 183, emphasis in original). More recently, Neumann (2013) warns of the disregard of this psychologized dimension of the curriculum in the literature of critical pedagogy. The author argues that critical pedagogists theoretical focus is on radical,

abstract, system change (political, economic, and cultural) rather than incremental experiential reforms. What is needed to Neumann is “an increased emphasis on a smaller, more practical, more effective critical pedagogy that appreciates the institutional barriers to educational reform and understands that any proposed reforms will always respond to the local needs of individual contexts” (p. 736), a pedagogy that “help[s] students learn to ask more meaningful, more nuanced, more analytical questions about the world around them” (p. 738; also see Neumann & Meadows, 2011, p. 93, p. 105). White (2015) situated this psychologization of the curriculum in the global reality of the 21st century and argues for a world citizenship achieved through a globalized and internationalized social studies curriculum in and for a globalized world. Such a global curricular perspective “will emphasize cross-cultural experiential learning and stress commonalities in cultures that transcend diversity” (White, 2015, p. 4).

Finally, students should be able to use the curriculum as an instrument to solve own problems, master “intelligent social action” (Dewey, 1937, p. 189), and reconstruct own experience and that of society (for example, see Dewey, 1938, p. 59). “Only in this connection of knowledge and social action can education generate the understanding of present social forces, movements, problems, and needs that is necessary for the continued existence of democracy” (Dewey, 1937, p. 184). Only then will the educated become the “reconstructive center of society” (Dewey as quoted in Mead, 1934, p. xxv).

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