

Education Review

Reseñas Educativas



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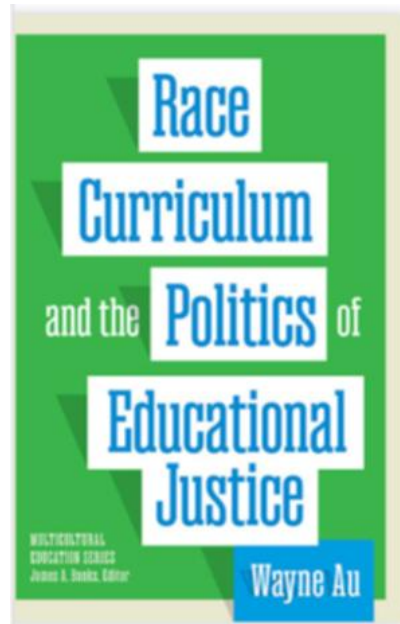
Au, W. (2025). *Race, curriculum, and the politics of educational justice*. Teachers College Press.

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Reviewed by Rachel Shearer
University of Colorado-Denver
United States

Wayne Au is a prolific scholar, educator, and activist. His extensive body of work focuses on critical education theory, teaching for social justice, and addresses the deeply ingrained inequities in high stakes standardized testing, power hierarchies within content curriculum, curriculum theory, and education policy studies. Au is also professionally affiliated with a number of organizations that share his research foci. *Race, Curriculum, and the Politics of Educational Justice* is a compendium of his recent scholarship concerning equity, social justice, and tangible, critical actions that can, and arguably must be taken to fundamentally redesign the education system, such as it is, that purports to serve our youth.



The book is organized into three parts: Part I: “Curriculum, and the Politics of Knowledge,” features previously published work from very different contexts, that channel what Eisner (2002) would call the explicit, implicit, and null curriculum; who has the power to decide what curricula entails, how it is introduced and interacted with by youth, and what (and if) knowledge that youth bring to the classroom will be validated. Part II: “Racial (In)Justice and Neoliberal Education Reform,” examines how policy shifts in the name of reform, such as the emphasis and contemporary reliance upon high-stakes standardized testing, influences and restricts the curricular and pedagogical decisions that teachers make in the classroom, and ultimately punish schools for their failure to demonstrate mastery in content that dominant society ascribes value to. The book concludes with Part III: “Asian American Racialization and Education,” which examines Asian American racialization in relation to other target groups, and how this act manifests within education history, politics, and as a thread through the book as a whole, curricula. In Part III, Au seeks to

address a gap that continues to permeate even the most progressive academic, policy, and activist spaces, including the use of the Asian American “Model Minority,” stereotypes to advance policies harmful for these students, as well as their peers of color, and which water down or omit opportunities for curriculum centering these histories to enrich students overall.

Part I is an invitation to educators to enter or critically reexamine their place in the trenches, alongside students, administrators, and caregivers, and to examine what it means to provide an equitable education. Au details with searing precision the deeply ingrained racism, sexism, misogyny, and the exclusion and exploitation of many other target groups, as well as the undergirding thereof by imperialism, colonialism, patriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy. He does this from a historical perspective, detailing how the desire for control and dominance has dictated education policy down to its manifestation in the classroom, into the modern rampancy of these oppressive tenets in our present social, cultural, and academic moment. He introduces a pedagogy of insurgency (pp. 25-30), building on critical pedagogies of Giroux (1993), DeLeon (2014), Stovall (2016), and McCoy (2017), as well as theoretical frameworks such as critical race theory (Crenshaw et al., 1995) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2020), though with a more explicit roadmap for implementation. He delineates actionable work that teachers can implement within and beyond the scope of their classroom communities, creating opportunity for radical teaching and education activism that cohere in pedagogical rebellion against domination. Au does this through several tenets, including, “bravery and risk, allyship and solidarity across communities of struggle, organizing and protest, critical analyses of power, curriculum of insurgency, contradictions of schooling and redesigning education, and connection to broader struggles and social movements” (p. 26).

In Part II, through the examination of high-stakes standardized testing, Au confronts the “civil rights issue of our time,” the human right that is equitable access to an education. The continuous argument for the reliance on high-stakes standardized testing is that without such data, how can teachers and schools be held accountable for the racial inequality that permeates schooling? Au deftly outlines the origins of these assessments from Stanford-Binet IQ testing, which sought to provide an “objective” qualification for white supremacy, and to codify working, middle, upper, and academic class strata (p. 65). From its transition to education policy in No Child Left Behind (NCLB), to its current iteration in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), rather than serving as a metric for closing so-called “achievement gaps” between youth of color and their white colleagues, this testing model ultimately functions as a method of retributive justice (p. 67). Youth of color are “held accountable,” for their performance, and are thereby the only ones to blame for the consequences thereof, including denial of graduation, loss of resources, and school closure. Au also details the impact on curricula resulting from deference to high-stakes standardized testing obligations. Such testing reinforces social efficiency curricular values (Schiro, 2013) driven by neoliberal principles relating youth to their capacity as “human capital,” and toward market ideologies which situate education as a site of “production, purchases, and profiteering... re-creating

policy and practice as a financial market... [and] generating profits from public education resources” (pp. 74-75). As in Part I, though, the author does not leave us without options: he explores opportunities for restorative assessment praxis and practices, such as assessment as a process of healing, or anti-racism, and how those pursuits may manifest through performance-based assessment tasks or portfolios (pp. 68-69). He details the possibilities inherent in coalition building between community members, students, teachers, and organizations of political power, such as the NAACP, in protest, resistance, and the potential of the opt-out movement (p. 92). We are asked to consider whom the frameworks that purport to give us options, such as school choice, the charter network, and school privatization, actually are designed to serve, and what power we can leverage within our communities to confront said civil rights issue of our time, in pursuit of true equity for all of the students that participate within it, particularly our youth of color, and our economically disadvantaged.

Part III continues its interrogation of policy and curricula through the lens of Asian American racialization. Au demonstrates how the harmful stereotype of the “Model Minority,” propagates division and reinforces white supremacist perceptions and beliefs about Black and Brown peoples (p. 122), especially as fodder for reinforcing high-stakes standardized tests as legitimate accountability measures, and as arguments against affirmative action. In the later example, he provides a thorough history of how affirmative action came to be and its historical and contemporary support,. Au shows how conservative politicians reframed critique around lack of access and representation as evidence of preferential racial quotas discounting individual merit. This co-opting of “negative action” and conflation with affirmative action on the part of these politicians functioned as a means to remediate white supremacist ideology, and institutionalized racism (p. 127). Here, Au puts forth a call for solidarity in anti-racism. In recognizing that our education system reproduces social and economic inequities, these stereotypes can be challenged through “expansive solidarity,” including “radically reconstructing and relearning Asian American histories that includes progressive, radical, and even revolutionary activism” that vehemently contradict the Model Minority stereotype; supporting Asian American Studies curriculum within a liberatory Ethnic Studies approach; and making connections with other histories in communities of struggle against colonialism and white supremacy (pp. 121-122).

Although one could argue that this text is most addressed to educators and to the actionable steps that they can take in their classroom, professional, and larger communal affiliations, these essays have been written, assembled, and revised with intent and specificity, stripped of excess ivory tower jargon, so that any reader can access the histories, impacts, and potential action steps one can take to authentically negotiate power in pursuit of education equity. This book is most certainly for classroom teachers, who must continually reexamine their place within institutional hierarchies built on racism, exploitation, and exclusion; teachers who must engage in cyclical self-reflexivity in the construction and facilitation of curricula, both recognizing and naming that white supremacy has dictated much of what capitalism, patriarchy, and imperialism have defined as valuable knowledge.

This book is also for the administrator, who must examine the possibilities that accompany their station; to what extent can they facilitate anti-racist, activist, insurgent pedagogy in their teachers? What decisions can they make about assessment to best determine what and how much their students know, and to demonstrate the value of that learning? How can they partner with community members – stakeholders, legislators, policymakers, and most critically, families, caregivers, and supporters of these youth – to co-construct an educational space that is holistic, equitable, and empowering to students? This book is for that community member, who may, like so many of us, feel frozen or isolated in helplessness, bowled over by the stripping of resources that support public education, the disinformation regularly propagated by federal agencies, mainstream media, and social media. Au writes also for the parents who know that their child's score on the SAT does not speak to the funds of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) that they bring to the classroom, to the neighborhood, or the extent to which they could inform policy. The book is for the policy maker who watches community schools close as a result of underperformance on high-stakes standardized tests, who studies the disproportionate suspension and expulsion rates of youth of color in an annual report, and who sees the explicit link between school closures and the school-to-prison nexus (Davis, 2003; Meiners & Winn, 2010; Rodriguez, 2008; Schnyder, 2010; Sojourner, 2016; Wun, 2015; Stovall, 2018). In effect, the target audience for this book is arguably anyone who engages with education: youth, teachers, administrators, superintendents, politicians and policymakers, caregivers, and community members. Education is intrinsically woven into every social, cultural, political, and legal institution, and its health necessarily impacts everyone in society.

What makes this text vital is its duality. It deftly portrays the history of injustice that permeates our school system from its inception to modernity, drawing on narrative and testimony alongside thorough research and substantiation of the many facets that comprise this reality. It delineates pedagogies, theories, and frameworks that have given us the language to dissect these injustices, to measure their effects, and analyze their long-term impacts, *and* it offers us concrete methods, tools, and actions that we can leverage from multiple societal vantage points to reconstitute that system. These articles and essays crystallize the immediacy of the moment, and do not withhold what makes that moment dire. However, they do not leave the reader bereft, with empty hands. Rather, it is a call to action. Whether from the classroom community, the university, the political arena, or the streets themselves, this text asks us what we can imagine within a pedagogy of insurgency. What would that classroom look like? How would students' voices sound, and what would they teach their peers, teachers, and community that we may not have had access to before? How would they teach it to us? How would our communities, governance, economy, and environment change upon their entrance into these domains, having emerged from an education space that not only enabled them to holistically learn, but demonstrated the value that they brought to it? Au writes, "it is time to openly rebel against it all... not only give ourselves permission to resist but understand that it is our duty to resist, and that only

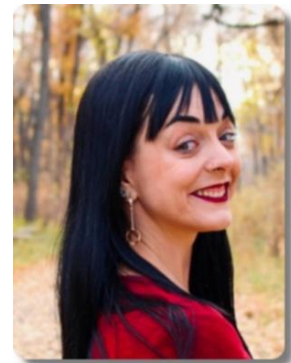
through engaging in collective struggle will we find a new path forward for the sake of all our people and our planet” (p. 30).

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About the Reviewer

Rachel Shearer (she/her) is a secondary educator who has taught high school English language, literature, and research in Aurora, Colorado, for nearly a decade. She is a doctoral student studying leadership in educational equity, in the Justice, Equity, and Diverse Identities (JEDI) program at the University of Colorado Denver. Rachel is also a Policy Fellow for Teach Plus+ Colorado, who represent teaching contexts in suburban, urban, and rural environments, leveraging teacher expertise to



create meaningful recommendations on education policy. She identifies as a critical and learner-centered pedagogue and feels passionately that education is a liberatory tool to empower the voices of youth as agents of social reconstruction.

About the Book Author

Wayne Au is professor and dean of the School of Educational Studies at the University of Washington Bothell. Au received his bachelor's degree in Liberal Studies and master's in Teaching from The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, and received his doctorate in Curriculum Studies from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Throughout his career, Au has been honored with numerous awards for his outstanding teaching and scholarship, including the 2023 Weissberg Chair for Human Rights and Social Justice at Beloit College, the Distinguished K-12 Educational Leader Award from the Evergreen State College Master in Teaching program and UW Bothell's Distinguished Teaching Award.



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