

# *Journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies*

## **A Field in Flux: Notes from an Administrative Escapee**

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### **Abstract:**

This essay explores the evolving landscape of Curriculum Studies/Theory, reflecting on the author's personal journey from university administration back to academic scholarship. It examines the historical and contemporary challenges faced by the field, including its diffusion into teacher education programs and the impact of political and ideological divides on curriculum content. The essay highlights significant contributions from recent publications and programs that continue to shape the field, while also addressing the broader societal and educational contexts that influence curriculum theory and practice. Through a blend of personal narrative and scholarly analysis, the author underscores the importance of maintaining a dynamic and inclusive approach to curriculum studies in the face of ongoing challenges and opportunities.

**Keywords:** Curriculum studies, Curriculum theory, Currere, Autobiography, Curriculum and politics.

I almost did not write this essay<sup>1</sup>. When the JAACS Special Edition editors sent me the call for abstracts, I printed it, pinned it to my reminders board, and thought I'd do it if I had time over the summer—not really believing I'd have time over the summer. Because of one pressing matter or another, I never did. After the deadline was well past, I tossed the paper in the waste basket, clearing an open space on the board. Have you heard the old saying, "People make plans; God laughs"? God must have been cracking Godself up that day. Within a week, my career as a university administrator

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<sup>1</sup> Note: I used AI, specifically ChatGPT, to generate an outline for this essay. All content was edited and written by me to ensure originality and uphold academic integrity. I assume all responsibility for its content and conclusions. I believe employing AI is particularly appropriate in a reflection on the state of the field, as it currently proliferates throughout all aspects of our society. We as academics must harness rather than deny this state.

was over, so I turned to the only work that feels like “home” to me. Truthfully, the only work I knew I was good at as salve to my wounded spirit. I started reading and writing Curriculum Theory.

Two very helpful collections were recently published that are useful to this essay, *Curriculum Guidebooks*, a two-volume set, edited by Marla Morris (2015), and *Curriculum Histories in Place: The Louisiana State University Curriculum Theory Project*, edited by Petra Hendry, Molly Quinn, Roland Mitchell, and Jacqueline Bach (2023). The original concept for Morris’s *Guidebooks* was as a sequel to Pinar et al’s influential *Understanding Curriculum* (1995), and it succeeds in being unique and exploratory on its own. *Curriculum Histories* collects autobiographical essays in the spirit of LSU’s Curriculum Theory Project (CTP) to celebrate the CTP’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Between the two, but certainly not limited to them, I got a refresher course on continued work in the field of Curriculum Theory/Studies, particularly from scholars like me who studied under the early Reconceptualists. An explanatory note: throughout this essay, I will refer to the field as Curriculum Studies/Theory and Curriculum Theory/Studies. While it can be (and often is) argued that the two are distinct fields, I find that most scholars will concede they are more alike than different, so I use the terms interchangeably to honor the people, work, and distinctions in both fields.

In her Preface to *Curriculum Histories*, Janet Miller states, “Unfortunately, however, the academic arena known as ‘curriculum studies’ since the 1920s in the USA either has been subsumed in recent years under the generic umbrella of teacher education or has disappeared completely in many U.S. universities and colleges” (p. xix). She goes on to note, programs such as the CTP at LSU moves to continue the field of curriculum studies/theory AS a distinct field and the program “necessary, vibrant, and committed” (p. xix). There are other programs, of course, that are committed to curriculum studies where generations of new scholars continue to emerge and proliferate, however decreasingly small their number may be. Programs such as those at Texas Christian University, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, and George Washington University generate fresh takes on curriculum through distinct courses and programs. If I attempt to name more, I will surely omit many more. However, one stand-out program is Doctor of Education in Curriculum Studies at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, Georgia, a rural community some 55 miles west of Savannah — close enough for faculty to live but not close enough for it to have an urban or coastal city feel. Students who come to GSU for graduate degrees in education are working professionals—teachers and principals from local schools. Yet there is also a unique concentration of curriculum scholars associated with the program who are well published, engaged, and highly regarded in the field — perhaps a higher concentration than are currently CTP-affiliated at LSU. Program faculty considered their setting and

heavily recruited the locals and in so doing accomplished something impressive and amazing—they grew students where they both were planted. The field looks healthy in South Georgia.

I recall at a townhall meeting of AACTE in the 2010s the first time I heard the discussion surrounding diffusing Curriculum Theory/Studies into teacher education programs, as Miller suggests above—we were at the same meeting. There were others at the meeting who took a “glass half full” stance and saw dissolving and dismantling curriculum programs as an opportunity for broader proliferation of the field-without-programs. I did not have confidence in that strategy then, nor do I—informed by decades of education preparation administration—see it working now, poignant as their optimism may have been. To use a teacher education example, closing CS/CT programs and sprinkling content into coursework has about the same effectiveness as when the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) cut its accreditation standards for diversity and technology and mandated instead that they would be infused throughout the program. By placing them everywhere, they are nowhere. Again, there are exceptions—Kennesaw State University does not have a Curriculum Studies degree, yet curriculum scholars on faculty, such as Drs. Nichole Guillory and Erik Malewski, build coursework around the field. Generally, wherever they are placed, curriculum scholars produce curriculum scholarship. This is an important component of the state of the field.

I recall one year during that same time period there were only three Curriculum Studies/Theory positions listed in this country, and there were at least 200 curriculum graduates and existing faculty vying for them. In these situations, the candidate who gets the job depends on whether the university is willing to compensate an established scholar or opts instead to budget for a less expensive recent graduate of one of the established scholars—who were often mentors of the new graduates. This, of course, assumes that the program or courses in which the new hire will be placed makes the cut itself. Curriculum theorists can also find homes in programs that have maintained foundations courses in undergraduate programs and sometimes in interdisciplinary programs. Those of us who hold a specialization within a Curriculum & Instruction doctorate can sometimes “pass” to search committees and faculty who may not know the radical nature of this field, IF we can get through the research talk. This is how I got my first university job. That leaves programs, courses, students, and faculty being diffused into fields that Curriculum Theory has historically considered “deformed” (Pinar, 2012). How welcoming does one suppose their new homes will be to the newcomers?

The phrase “state of the field” itself conflicts and contradicts the essence(s) of the field(s). From where I stand as an outgoing college of education administrator, Curriculum Studies/Theory is ambiguous, agnostic, in-complete, contextualized, contentious, and contingent—and any other words that suggest stumbling toward a “moreness.” The state of the field now seems much as it was when I entered it two decades ago. I suspect it seems something as it did when it was newly Reconceptualized in those heady days that have been passed down to us as histories and recounted to us as legend. I suspect, too, that others like me who are intellectual theorists have followed career paths that have led us a good distance away from where we started.

In my own case, my career veered toward administration, where my concern has been administrating teacher and leader education. I have read little Curriculum Studies/Theory scholarship—and written even less over the years. For the first almost twenty years of my academic career, I was at a large institution, a place where other curriculum and education studies scholars gathered. We gravitated toward each other, diverse as our individual writing had been. Curriculum Studies/Theory had, as predicted those years ago, been infused into educator programs. However, I have found this to be less so at the smaller, regional comprehensive institution where I have been for the last three years. From an administrative perspective, there is little space remaining in the curriculum for much that is not directly related to field experiences and Praxis tests. State and federal requirements, CAEP and Specialized Professional Associations (SPAs) accreditation standards, assessment data collection, and reporting. Teacher programs notoriously lack room for elective coursework. Faculty must not only grade assignments and enter the data into assessment software, but they also advise, observe students, prepare lessons—not to mention institutional service, the hobgoblin of any gratifying productivity for many of us.

I am pleased to return to the ranks of faculty and keep up with states of the field, which will include attending curriculum conferences and submitting work to our journals. But this begs a rather obvious question. If the only places one can find curriculum theorizing is at our conferences and in our journals, what does this say about our field? Where else is it exactly? Are we responsible for or are we essentially armchair quarterbacking societal injustices we observe, dread, fear, or even predict? If this seems like a rather bleak analysis of the field, I do not believe it completely is. The greater the turmoil, the greater the opportunities—and the greater the possibility that people will be open to what the curriculumarists are saying. This is one context that differentiates the field then and now. The field remains as dynamic as it ever was, but the political and social contexts are ever shifting. The seismic shift over the past 4 decades—I mark it with not Nixon or Vietnam but with Reagan—has led to the extreme polarization of the people in the U.S. I cannot help but find it astonishing that the split

on opinions and ideologies concerning any issue — from abortion, immigration, the economy to what news is real to what is “fake” — is consistently 50%/50%. However, one issue that is decidedly one-sided is universal student loan forgiveness, which only 29% of Americans support (the number varies depending on the poll. I cite the USA Today/Ipsos poll, May 2024). It is to the Curriculum field as a reflection of this polarization that I turn now; for the struggle for curriculum is both local and nationwide.

The state of the curriculum field is deeply intertwined with the U.S.’s broader political and ideological divides. From controversial content to legislative actions and even grassroots movements, curriculum has become a reflection of the polarization we see nationwide. The ways we teach about race, class, gender, history, and science have all been influenced by ideological battles, and these differences are stark. There’s a clear divide over what should be included in the curriculum — and some issues are complicated on a good day--Critical Race Theory (CRT), gender identity, and how we teach history, for example. Conservative states like Florida and Texas have passed laws prohibiting certain content, or in what might be a worse option than forbidding it, mandating **how** it is taught. My home state of Alabama is a case in point.

This legislative year Alabama passed several bills related to education. They created a \$100 million “education savings account” program, which is essentially a voucher program. Conservative states have been working for vouchers for decades, and the present political landscape is allowing them to. Families of eligible students can use the vouchers to pay for private school tuition. The system is “universal,” which means that low-income families and families with homeschooled children will also be eligible. The news article I accessed states, “While universal vouchers are still somewhat new, news reports show that the biggest group of families who access the vouchers have children already attending private schools” (Chandler, 2025). Yes, those who have been using their considerable influence to lobby for vouchers for decades.

In addition, the state passed two new laws that broaden parents’ access to materials teachers use in the classroom, such as books, textbooks, and periodicals that include magazines and newspapers. Think, My Weekly Reader for example. Named the “Parents’ Right to Know Act,” it requires schools to post materials teachers plan to use at the beginning of the school year, and if these materials change, the post must be updated. Not only can parents request additional information, but they can also lodge complaints. According to the process, the FIRST level of complaint is the local superintendent. If there is no resolution in 10 days, parents are directed to take their complaint to the state superintendent. There does not seem to be a provision for questions that begin with the local schoolteacher or principal. Alabama is another state

to ban diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in both K-12 schools and higher education. Jacksonville State University, for example, has already dissolved its DEI office. This law bans schools from requiring students, employees, or contractors from attending or participating in DEI programs. This law extends a resolution previously passed by the Alabama State Board of Education that preserves “intellectual freedom and non-discrimination” in public schools. We are in George Orwell’s land of moral and political inversion.

School board meetings have become battlegrounds where these issues are publicly debated, mirroring the national polarization. Loudoun County, Virginia, is a prime example, where local meetings on transgender policies and curriculum inclusion turned into national headlines. These battles demonstrate how local educational issues are influenced by the broader ideological struggles happening across the country. Grass roots of the far right, such as “Moms for Liberty,” carry out the strategic infiltration voiced by groups like the “Moral Majority” and its founder Jerry Falwell in the 1970s and 1980s. In great part, this “long game” plan is working, and I would argue it has fueled our 50/50 cultural and political split. Media and social media fuel divisiveness by amplifying the debates. Google “angry school board meetings” for videos of parents and community members at the open microphone in sheer outrage. Topics range from transgender issues (bathrooms are a particularly hot topic) to immigration to “Don’t Say Gay” rules to CRT to reactions to the 1619 Project. For these last two especially, misinformation abounds, as no one will have read either the 1619 Project or explanations of what CRT really is. When I watch these—or see them broadcast on CNN---I sometimes start out feeling amused because the arguments and behavior are so outrageous as to be comical. But I quickly become bewildered, sad—and if I am not careful, outraged myself at the extreme misinformed diatribe, which I understand would be the reaction of those speakers were I to step up to the mic.

In higher education, restrictions are often camouflaged in inverted language of “intellectual freedom,” and freedom of expression—like union-busting states calling themselves “Right to Work States.” The college of education at my current institution, for example, excludes references to diversity, equity, and inclusion in most teacher education courses, and we are instructed to remove them from new proposals for the approval process. And while the institution did not close its Office of DEI, it simply did not replace the outgoing director, so the office ceased to exist. At my previous institution, we were instructed to remove the words social justice from a proposal for a doctoral program, as well as the requirement that students’ dissertations would include an aspect of social justice in their framework. This criterion is directly derived from the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) and is based on the work of renowned educational psychologist Lee Shulman, particularly his theory of Pedagogical

Content Knowledge (PCK) from the 1980s. Further, the institution itself is a CPED member institution.

These few examples of the struggle for curriculum in K-12 and higher education exemplify both the national divide and the state of the field, which are inextricably intertwined. Curriculum Studies has recognized since its emergence as a field that education is not equitable in the U.S. — that the education a student receives is largely based on her zip code, as is that student's life expectancy, chances of living in poverty, or achieving social mobility. The divide on ideology and politics further divides the equity in education, which is the concern of the field. And so we return to the notion of Curriculum Studies/Theory being infused — or diffused — into Teacher Education. Teacher Education, from my experience, takes a conservative approach to curriculum, one that stresses design, practice, and assessment. It is difficult but not impossible to critically examine education and promote justice and equity in education courses, especially given that there is very little encouragement to do so. What might it mean, on the other hand, if scholars and teachers in the Curriculum Studies/Theory field, infused practice into how we think about those larger contexts of curriculum that stimulate us intellectually — like psychoanalysis, post-reconceptualism, queer theory, and yes, CRT? Some scholars and programs, such as those mentioned earlier, are finding ways to do this in graduate programs. However, undergraduate teacher education, which has been my recent administrative focus, is seldom the audience for Curriculum Studies. We assign our books — and those whose work have inspired us — to our graduate students. Most of these would be largely inaccessible to undergraduate students who want to teach 5 year-olds.

I do not know what the political, cultural, and social future holds for this country. But, maybe, like church attendance, our work is stronger in the urgency of crisis. We have a challenge before us, for we have in a sense been a victim of our own success. That is, radical conservative movements have mirrored plays from our playbook. For example, curriculum theorists have called for dismantling power structures and have insisted interrogating truth as neither singular nor objective. Our critical analyses challenge foundational beliefs about American history, national identity, and even concepts of morality, which many on the political Right view as core to their values. The examples earlier in this essay are instances where the Right are pushing back — dismantling structures, challenging truth, and promoting freedom of expression that insists narratives of white supremacy be included as diversity of thought. With regards to education, the ideological clash reflects the broader polarization in the U.S. Right's moves to re-gain control over the narrative of what should be taught in school — whose truth, whose history, whose sex education, whose narrative. While we continue to disburse and diffuse our work into fields outside of

Curriculum Studies/Theory, conservative groups are consolidating around a set of foundational beliefs that could be taken from Butler's *Contingent Foundations* (1992). To be sure, the Right does not believe Foundations are contingent.

I believe, then, that the influence of the field is glaringly present in the pushback against the contingent narratives and foundations from our "communities without consensus," as Janet Miller has frequently called for. I am pessimistic about the dreadful near political and social condition of this country. I am a curriculum theorist, so I know better than to call for a rally, a coming together to fight for....what? Interrogating Truth? A cacophony of voices? I am not even sure we could write a unified strongly worded letter. Perhaps it is for us to aim our dissensus collectively toward common concerns by naming them and picking them up from our particular locations as academics. In a session that capped off my academic homecoming this year, Patti Lather, Elizabeth Macedo, and Janet Miller reflected on the long professional and personal 40-year friendship of Lather and Miller. Miller not only reiterated her insistence on communities without consensus but added to that that the ongoing success and relevance of our field will be that we do this work together. To punctuate the nature of the work we do, Lather described her field work for her book, *Troubling the Angels: Women Living with HIV/AIDS*. She contended that, while the "field work is our best friend," in her own work she rejected feedback and calls from critics to present the work in a conventionally anthropological study by "coming back to the theory." That is when I realized how the essay must end.

When I lost my appointment as dean, I wanted to go to my Curriculum Theory home, the first place I presented my academic work and the place I would find old friends and familiar language. I am writing now as I have before—by the fireplace at the conference center, feet up, oblivious to deep conversations going on around me. This essay has been on a month-long journey with me to ensure I have a field to come home to—and find whether it would take me back in. I am inspired by the presentations of Curriculum Theory/Studies work I have heard here—by scholars who have been doing this work for 50 years or 50 months. Being here has not only invited me to sit quietly and be okay with my return to the field, but also to feel release in a pragmatic hopefulness that also marks our field. I have visited with friends and heard about their exciting projects, like a Curriculum and Research unit whose grant funding went directly into communities with whom they partnered. "And get this," my friend said. "We took teacher education completely out of our department." While I am happy for the luxury of intellectual freedom to actually "do" Curriculum Studies—as well as for this "win" for the field itself, I am also torn. The Teacher Education programs are also now free—to omit Curriculum Theory/Studies from its already-full curricula. Each group has lost a little something with its freedom, or so it seems to me.

At this small conference, an old friend and brilliant scholar brought so many graduate students to present their classroom-based theoretical work, he had a hard time getting them seated at the local restaurant. Graduate student participation is an indicator of the state of the field; new research is the lifeblood of it – not the return of us old folks. Another friend and I visualized, as we have done over the years, what it might mean of our various curriculum conferences – Bergamo, C&P, and AAACS – each of which has its own correlated peer-reviewed journal – could work collaboratively, perhaps even existing under an umbrella 504 structure. Each conference and each journal are critical to the field. In my opinion, having been around for twenty years and viewing it from the outside for the last two, the specifically Curriculum Studies/Theory-focused conferences and journals are the non-negotiables. Programs and courses may be blended into those of other fields, and we may publish across a host of disciplines, but we must have a place to come home to. And no matter which conference and journal are our sentimental and/or intellectual favorites, the flourishing of all of them must be all our collective concern.

It is good that I returned to Bergamo. Curriculum scholars that include graduate students and academics at all stages of our careers are what keep it not just surviving but, well, if not thriving, then holding steady. Yes, I am having a Grinch moment:

"It came without ribbons. It came without tags. It came without packages, boxes or bags.

Maybe Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store. Maybe Christmas... perhaps...

means a little bit more!"

Thinking about the field, maybe....

It's in Bergamo, in Curriculum & Pedagogy, and in AAACS. Curriculum is found in journals like JCT and JAAACS. Maybe the field, I thought, is in Georgia and Baton Rouge, D.C., and Rio Grande. Maybe it exists without a particular brand. Maybe Curriculum can thrive in and out of Teacher Ed and programs across the world. \*\*

Wherever we come back to theory, from whatever "fieldwork" we might align with, therein will be the field – messy, contingent, partial, disruptive, troubling, and contentious. We will do as we have always done, find our way along a pathway we continually must clear to proceed. And, from our conferences, journals, gatherings, and placements in the academy, we will do it...together.

\*\*AAACS is the American Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies. It's associated journal is the Journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies, or JAACS.

JCT is the Journal of Curriculum Theorizing, the journal associated with the Journal of Curriculum Theory and Classroom Practice, now better known by the retreat center where it is held, Bergamo.

Curriculum & Pedagogy is another major Curriculum conference, referred to as C&P. It also has an affiliated journal of the same name.

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