Pedagogical Pivoting, Emergent Curriculum, and Knowledge Production
But Just Don't Call It Social Justice

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I N HER WIDELY SHARED ARTICLE, "Elementary Education Has Gone Terribly Wrong," appearing in the August 2019 issue of *The Atlantic*, journalist Natalie Wexler argues convincingly that school curriculum too often exclusively focuses on skill acquisition at the expense of engaging with knowledge. Wexler suggests that a lack of knowledge engagement has had detrimental effects on children in U.S. schools. For those of us engaged in curriculum research, or for that matter for anyone who has spent time with young people in an elementary classroom, this is of no surprise. That children are motivated by and respond to curriculum that is relevant to their lives and is responsive to their curiosities and contexts is not a radical concept. But as Wexler details, most schools do not organize the learning opportunities for students or the teaching expectations for teachers based on a knowledge-rich environment. Instead, schooling, particularly for students who come from lower income and communities of color, has focused on skill-based and repetition-oriented approaches. The premise that students need to have such "basics" or skills before they can engage in knowledge acquisition, let alone knowledge production, lacks not only a research basis, but also harms children by stifling their learning opportunities in the process. Inquiry-based approaches to teaching and learning have been marginalized for decades in lieu of standards-based approaches that decontextulize learning. Classroom learning more often than not rests on the idea that, "because you will need this next year," students need to practice skills over and over before they can engage in more meaningful, worthwhile learning.

Wexler brings forward to a wide audience the idea that skills can be learned through engagement with knowledge. We argue even further: Students can learn skills as they engage in knowledge production and meaning making—rather than the focusing solely on skills through rote memorization or knowledge acquisition. And although Wexler wholly misses the opportunities to offer a critique of whose knowledge is valued and whose is marginalized or the premise for culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy, her challenge, albeit incomplete (and resting on out-

of-date notions of cultural literacy), raises an important issue that illuminates significant shortcomings in how our society chooses to approach school curriculum.

Imagining an alternative to the often-scripted, listless curriculum and sharing possible obstacles is where we situate this article: namely making meaning of one teacher's perspectives on the journey of changing her pedagogical approach in her third-grade classroom and the naming or labeling of this approach. The teacher and second author of this article, Stephanie, is conscious to do what we are describing here as a pedagogical pivot. Specifically, we are interested in better understanding her shifts in approaching curriculum, the ways in which she engages with students as a teacher, and the complicatedness of context in doing so.

Stephanie seeks to pivot from a skill-acquisition, teacher-centered approach to one that honors the questions, curiosities, and interests of her eight- and nine-year-old students. The students become not only formidable experts on topics important to them, but they also become knowledge producers based on their interest in and capacity for digging deep into the topics they have chosen to explore and problems they are seeking to solve. This pivot challenges Stephanie's identity as a teacher, particularly when her students name issues important to their lives that contradict her understanding of developmentally appropriate curricular topics. As the students name issues that they want to tackle, subjects often grouped as social justice topics are unleashed. Whereas Stephanie is full-throated in wanting to support her students as she makes this transition, the transition itself is filled with concern, caution, and trepidation, despite the joyfulness, contemplation, reflection, and exuberance she shares in the pedagogical exploration. This is in part because of her shifting view of curriculum, challenges and skepticism from colleagues and administrators, and the explicit framing of the work as social justice teaching.

The context of high-stakes testing and outside mandates causes many teachers to find it exceedingly difficult to identify openings and opportunities to shift from rigid curricula to inquiry-based and emergent (Hopkins, 1954) forms of action-focused curricula that engage students with topics they name (Schultz, 2017). This article focuses, via narrative inquiry, on perspectives—drawn from a co-teaching experience—of Stephanie and a university professor, Brian, who worked together to adjust pedagogical approaches from a skill-acquisition approach to one that listened to and engaged young people (Noguera, 2003) around issues the students identified as most important. Narrative inquiry stories our contemplations and reflections on such an approach against the backdrop of colleague and administrative questioning, heightened accountability informed by interpretations of current educational policy, and notions of "doing curriculum as usual" without questioning who decided and why that is ubiquitous in the United States.

The narrative specifically illustrates Stephanie's pedagogical pivot to explore emergent, contextual, and action-focused curriculum while resisting labeling the approach as justice-oriented. Stephanie embraced this emergent approach as she could argue it was used as a means to support her students, focus curriculum on their concerns, realize standards prescribed from the outside, and be relevant and responsive to their questions. She saw how empowered her students became as achievements grew beyond the classroom. However, ideological differences, small town politics, reluctance about being labeled as an activist or liberal teacher, among other issues, caused Stephanie to resist theorizing about the work with a justice-oriented identity.

The significance here lies in a teacher going beyond simply changing pedagogy or covering justice-related topics. Both of these have been seen in many classrooms. Instead, Stephanie's transformation yields teaching practices that do not often occur—namely, that young students readily engage in an emergent, inquiry-based curricular approach leading to sustained, months-long projects centered on social justice topics that students themselves named.

Democratic, Student-Centered, Culturally Relevant, and Social Justice Teaching

We draw on a long tradition of curriculum literature that focuses on student-centered learning, democratic teaching, and emergent curriculum. John Dewey's (1916) argument in *Democracy & Education*, that public schools are integral for students learning democratic processes, is cornerstone to how we think about our work. Central to Dewey's thesis is that schools must be sites where young people have opportunities to critically think, problem solve, and make decisions. In having such educational spaces, schools center students and become sites for them to learn how to work with one another and explore possibilities for answering questions. In line with Dewey's (1915) contention that schools should develop ways for students to work together, we situate this work in his argument that schools also must strive to be reflective of miniature communities.

Developing such community in schools was further articulated in Maxine Greene's (1986) interpretation of Dewey's ideal in her pathbreaking article, "In Search of a Critical Pedagogy." Greene suggested that, in such a community-oriented classroom, "there would be continuing and open communication, the kind of learning that would feed into practice, and inquiries arising out questing in the midst of life" (p. 434). When students have such opportunities in classrooms, particularly when their curiosities propel learning, the processes of democracy are practiced. In such classrooms, curriculum can emerge from the students (Hopkins, 1954); that is, the topics and issues taught within school could be generative of students' questions and ideas. Similarly, Paulo Freire's (1970/2000) theorizing that, when those who have the most at stake—in this case students—are able to engage with problems they have posed, curriculum can extend their critical consciousness and reflection and be an impetus to take action. Naming issues and taking action is important here; it is a space where students become both good analyzers of information and where they become producers of knowledge as they work to solve problems important to them.

The theoretical guidance offered by Dewey, Greene, Hopkins, and Freire provides a springboard for creating contemporary classrooms that are democratic, student-centered, problem-posing, and embrace an emergent curriculum. Many contemporary curricularists have taken these ideas to today's classroom context. For instance, Pedro Noguera (2003, 2008) argues that the promise of public education rests with schools that connect with and listen to the young people within them. Likewise, in *The Power of Their Ideas*, Deborah Meier (2002), one of the foremost contemporary proponents of progressive education, suggests that looking to students as essential decision-makers in their learning is not only critical to individual students' success but to that of the entire school community. Meier convinces followers and skeptics alike, through vivid examples in urban public schools she has led, of the deep potential of student-centered curriculum. Others, too, have made such a case. James Beane's (1997, 2005) efforts advocating for "curriculum integration" highlight how schools must be democratic and reflect the confluence of student concerns with societal issues. Beane, along with colleague Michael Apple (Apple & Beane, 2007), show a myriad of classroom possibilities in action where democratic practices are cornerstone. Bill Ayers' concepts of teaching toward freedom (2004) and teaching with conscience (2016) further the promise of imagining schools with students at the center. It is in such spaces, Ayers contends, that we can deliberate with students about curriculum and schooling and, in turn, affect societal change. Brian Schultz, too, has made the case for an action-focused, student-centered learning (2017) that listens to the topics and issues students find most worthwhile (2011).

Arguments that center students are inherently justice-oriented. All promote schooling that is both culturally relevant and contextually responsive. In her often-cited article, "But That's Just

Good Teaching," Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) makes a convincing case for what she calls culturally relevant pedagogy. Reflective of the arguments that Dewey, Freire, and others made in their theoretical guidance, culturally relevant pedagogy also centers students and, importantly, their lives within the curriculum. Others have built on and complemented this work including making the case for culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 1998), culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2014, 2017), and anti-oppressive education (Kumashiro, 2000). These orientations to teaching and learning are emphatically social justice oriented because they take an explicit stance to honor the culture(s) of the students while adhering to critical, multicultural, equity-focused principles and working against oppressive ideas. They also demand high expectations through experiential, authentic, and practical activities. Social justice classrooms connect students' lives with the materials, topics, and experiences of the classroom. Political, economic, and social matters are not removed from the curriculum, but instead become a part of how classroom curriculum gets enacted.

Methodology

We provide polyvocal vignettes of our experiences working together in and out of the classroom. These vignettes offer glimpses through what we refer to as "narrative points-of-entry" (Schultz et al., 2010, p. 372). These points-of-entry detail what each of us considered as we came into this work, our pursuits and thoughts, and our reflections on engaging together in this different approach to teaching—an approach that resisted many of Stephanie's assumptions from her previous 13 years of teaching. Likewise, Brian had only supported and encouraged teachers who had been his university students to practice this kind of work. Further, Brian had not previously co-taught in someone else's classroom, and third-graders would be the youngest age group for whom he had developed action-focused curriculum.

These narrative points-of-entry were not prescribed. Instead, reflective of the curricular approach, the points-of-entry were initially derived from the experiences and the discussions Stephanie had with Brian. Brian then wrote his own points-of-entry that contrasted, complemented, and rounded out the storytelling. The intention is not to tell a complete story in either series of vignettes, but instead to tell a complicated series of nuanced stories that shed light on our experiences working together as well as the theorizing that occurred on our own about this work.

We present our narratives side-by-side to allow for both complementary and diverging polyvocal portrayals of our lived experiences (Lather & Smithies, 1997; Madda et al., 2012; Schultz et al., 2010). Although on the surface we had a shared experience of being present during the same co-teaching moments, our interpretations are highly individualized, reflecting previous experiences and perspectives of the role of teacher, on what curriculum is and ought to be, and how to engage in a student-led curriculum that satisfies outside expectations. Our narratives speak for themselves where "more than one person's voice is presented" to "avoid writing from the perspective of the ultimate ethnographic authority" (Nelson, 2017, p. 21). This practice lets us disrupt exacting, authoritative, and precise writing done by professors who enter others' classrooms while providing a space for us "to interact on more equal footing" (Tobin & Davidson, 2006, p. 271). These polyvocal narratives demonstrate not only diversity of perspective, but also divergence caused by our varying positionalities as we write about and make meaning about the same experience(s) (Gershon, 2009).

In positioning the narratives in a side-by-side display, the reader has an opportunity to explore the storytelling in a multiplicity of ways: linearly for each author, toggling between each of our points-of-entry, or beginning and ending at any single point-of-entry. Because the vignettes were not prescribed, the exact number of entries and their corresponding lengths do not match. Importantly, though, positioning the narratives in such a way is intended to make the reader adjust to how the stories are presented. Storying this experience may cause a reader to adjust to discomfort and adjust to a different way of reading narrative(s). We acknowledge that adjusting in this way may make a reader uneasy. The differing viewpoints of the same experience is parallel to how classrooms are often interpreted, in this case prompting a reader, much like a classroom participant or observer, to determine how best to make meaning.

Data Sources

A multiplicity of data informs the vignettes and makes meaning of the discussion and conclusion. These data include a reflection journal Stephanie kept while engaging in this work, semi-structured and informal interviews, and ongoing discussions and conversations between Stephanie and Brian. These occurred face-to-face and over phone, email, and text messaging. Further, Stephanie engaged in the teaching and learning process with access to student work from her classroom, and Brian spent multiple days per week over multiple months volunteering in Stephanie's classroom. This provided Brian with opportunities to make informal observations of ongoing classroom pursuits.

Side-By-Side Narrative Points-of-Entry

I'll Teach Later	Running (from) Records
When Brian first asked to help in the classroom, I asked him to give district-mandated *Running Records* to students—a lame responsibility I was all-too-grateful to pass on. But he endured the task and continued to reach out, and now sat at my table. I was enthusiastic by what he was offering, but apprehensive, too.	Sunday nights were the worst. Our 8-year-old was having a tough time with the adjustment. He begged, pleaded with us to head back to Chicago. He wanted what was familiar. He wanted to go back to his old school. His school had been different: no textbooks, no grades, no tests or quizzes, and no prescriptive curriculum. Instead, the children's questions, concerns, and interests guided an emergent and project-oriented approach to classroom teaching and learning.
Though a guest in my space, he was in a position of some power at the local university and a parent of one of my new students. He was also a great resource for my many questions about how to make space for students to have their ideas and curiosities drive the curriculum in my classroom. I struggled with how to twist my apprehension into helpful questions. How could I name	If I could spend some time in Mrs. Pearson's third-grade classroom, I thought, I might have an opportunity to influence how curriculum and pedagogy were enacted in her classroom. But aside from such hopefulness and without getting ahead of my

what I was feeling? I knew honoring my students was right, and I wasn't satisfied by making canned curriculum "more fun" each week, but I couldn't envision an alternative. Blocking my conceptualization was the worry of many teachers: fear of test scores, making it all fit, and what kind (what skills and knowledge?) of students I would pass on to the next grade…

"What does it look like in the scope of a day? a week? How much time do I devote to this?" I manage.

"That's up to you. I'll come in; we'll launch it together."

Eagerly, but with trepidation I asked, "Well, when can we start?" Unspoken, "and when does it end? how does it fit?"

Maybe we'd do this a couple of days a week? I resolved *to teach* on the other days to fit in district pacing.

Contemplating White Nationalism

I stood in the back of the room beside Brian and listened, "So here are the big problems the kids named yesterday, and today they'll vote on the one they want to solve the most," he motioned to the poster in front of us.

"They'll choose their groups based on the problems they name, voting on violence, natural disasters, sickness, pollution, school tests, bullying, and poaching," he points to each problem on the list as he speaks, which allows me to take notice when his hand skips over "White Nationalists/Civil Rights/Immigration."

I gave him a questioning look without turning my head to face him directly. "Did you mean to omit the White Nationalism problem?"

He hesitated. His voice even, "You don't seem comfortable with the idea."

presumptuous self, I really needed to help my own kid get adjusted to a new house, a new city, new friends, and, perhaps most importantly, a different approach to schooling.

Communicating with Mrs. Pearson early on, my wife and I let her know how we anticipated a struggle. Hesitant to critique her teaching, as we had enrolled him in the neighborhood public school, I offered to volunteer in her classroom in any way she found helpful. Being close to the school, I found it easy enough to step away from my university office to head over to the elementary school. Yet, I did not really know what I was in for.

She quickly took me up on the offer (and told me to call her Stephanie, too). She suggested I could start by doing some *Running Records* with her students. I admit I was unfamiliar with the practice (even though I had taught at the elementary level in Chicago), so much so I texted a literacy professor colleague to fill me in. But at that point, I was willing to do *anything* to ease the angst and lessen the tears on Sunday nights.

I cringed. Wondering if I was doing more harm than good, I shook my head indicating I could not help the young boy in front of me. I was in the school's hallway, working one-on-one with a third-grader from Stephanie's classroom. He repeatedly looked at me for guidance as he worked through a photocopied reading passage. My job doing the *Running Record* was to code and score his fluency on the clipboard Stephanie had prepared for me.

As I questioned my ability to continue "volunteering" in her room, I was still hopeful that together we could delve into more imaginative curricular work once I slogged through what felt like doing damaging things to young people.

I considered this. Why was I uncomfortable? Where should I start: This topic could become controversial for a teacher in this small town. Is it appropriate for 3rd-graders to research? How might parents react when they hear? How would my principal react? Still, a student wrote it, and shouldn't I honor that?

I swallowed. "Let's leave it on the list and let students vote on it," I say.

"You sure?"

"I am."

Curriculum Meeting

"Let's get this party started," said Emily. Along with the other third grade teachers, we were touching base in my classroom before school started.

"Coming up in the program is point of view, drawing conclusions, and a prefix word study," Jen started as she consulted the teacher manual from our district's purchased curriculum. With exasperation she added, "I'm so far behind. I don't feel like my kids understand author's purpose from this week yet, but we're supposed to move on. What are you ladies going to do?"

"My kids aren't ready for drawing conclusions yet, and I know we hit that again later in the year," Emily considered. "But I really *do* want to do point of view. I found this great resource from a *Teachers Pay Teachers* with a super-cute mentor text and notebook activity."

"Oh you showed that to me!" Jen exclaimed. Turning to me, "I have the book if you want to borrow it. It's really good; much better than the text from our program."

"No doubt," I agreed flatly.

Post-It Notes and (Creating) Problems

Each child was given a set of three *Post-It Notes*. The prompt was simple: Write down some things that really bother you and that you'd want to spend some time working to solve.

The students had been given the weekend to contemplate issues and topics that they felt were big problems in their community that needed fixing. During the previous week, Stephanie and I had begun our co-teaching.

We shared examples with the third graders. Stories and videos highlighted characters or real people working to solve an identified problem. Stopping pollution. Eliminating plastic bags. Deforestation.

We facilitated group discussions, leveraged activity sheets familiar to Stephanie and to her students to document the issues the students observed, and foreshadowed next steps.

Now, it was the students turn to share the issues they had identified. There were no constraints. No boundaries. Simply write down your issues on the pieces of paper, the eight-year-olds were told.

Peering over the kids' shoulders as they sat in desk clusters around the room, the students were naming all sorts of issues that bothered them. Animal cruelty. Immigration. Natural disasters. Cheap cereal. Pollution. Itchy haircuts. Poaching. White Nationalism.

Yes. *Stopping White Nationalism* was one of the most pressing issues that one young boy named. And, he wanted it to be solved.

As this curriculum began to play out, was I stoking a fire and creating more problems than any of us were ready for?

"Here, I printed you a copy," Emily handed me a stack of papers. Complete with bordered clip art, the papers were cut-and-glue activities to use with our students.

I smiled tightly, "Thank you." They *were* cute. Can't curriculum be cute and rigorous too? If a *good* resource is out there, we don't need to invent the wheel...

"How did your class do last week with author's purpose, Stephanie?" Jen asked me. "I swear, when mine were analyzing text they couldn't tell the difference between inform and persuade."

"That *is* tricky to distinguish," I conceded. "Often times texts may do both of those things."

"Yeah, some of them even confused me! How much extra time are you spending on it? I swear I just don't know how to fit it all in."

I hesitated, "It's a tough balance for sure. I am wondering if that skill even needs too much focused attention. It's only part of the big reading picture, and we can weave it into any text discussion throughout the year," I offered.

Jen twisted her mouth in thought. "Maybe ... Are you going to work on it anymore?"

"My kids have a good sense of purpose and message when we read articles about our topics," I answered carefully.

"Gosh yeah those topics! I don't know about that," she pursed her lips. "I just don't feel comfortable with students talking about those things in my classroom."

Jen looked to Emily, who joined, "Yeah, I don't think my students really care much about poaching. Certainly not White Nationalism, but if you can make it work that's awesome."

My coworkers were experiencing the same doubts I had. But of course their students

Point and Click Curriculum

The example Stephanie shared with me was troubling. The materials pulled from a popular teacher resource website was not simply a promising tool being misused, but rather they were problematic activities that a fifth-grade teacher in her school had put in front of kids. They espoused blatantly inaccurate historical information about the Holocaust. Students were engaging with misinformation. And it was coming from their teacher.

The teacher had found what she thought was a great resource to complement the social studies textbook. Using a common source many teachers do, she had found a teacher-written account of Germany post-World War II on the website, *Teachers Pay Teachers*. The curriculum author or teacher-now-paid-curriculum-developer sold her version of history over this website to unaware teachers, including Stephanie's colleague. The colleague in turn shared it with students.

With quick Internet search, any teacher can find activities on websites like *Pinterest* that are sure to "capture" their students' attention. Likewise, they can pay opportunistic "colleagues" looking to make a buck through forums like *Teachers Pay Teachers*. The materials are only vetted by the purchasers.

Stephanie shared this with me in the context of our conversations where teachers are always searching for ways to supplement basal texts and find ways to connect with their students. Unfortunately, the lack of vetting and perhaps the inadequate content knowledge of teachers causes them to often find simple, easy to implement resources that are lacking. Stephanie had pointed out earlier that these sorts of resources were often "the right tools in the wrong hands." I am not so sure they are even the right tools.

weren't talking about issues important to them, because space wasn't made in the classroom to do so. My students' topics surprised me also. But they came *from the students*. How could I argue with that?

"I brought some of the resources I made with my class these last few weeks to help share what we're working on. While working, the students definitely have to consider point of view and author's purpose," I offered my plain documents, created alongside students and relating to those "risky" social justice topics.

"Thank you," their voices together forced gratitude with a higher pitch.

There was a pause.

We all wrestled with how to move forward past the unease. Emily switched the subject to math to wrap up our meeting.

As my students filed in to start the day a few minutes later, I noticed the papers I had shared forgotten at the desks where my colleagues had sat.

Lucky for the Opportunity

"Hey, Brian is coming by today if you want to pop in the classroom and see what's happening," I leaned into my principal's office one morning.

"Oh yeah? I'm sure whatever you guys are doing is great," he shifted in his chair.

My principal is big on relationships with his staff. He's in classrooms every day, visible to students, and approachable to all. This clipped response was out of character.

"It is...?" I probed, then let the silence between us build.

He broke it, "Yeah. I love the relationship with the university," flashing a smile and

Natalie Wexler, in *The Atlantic* piece that we cited to open this article, pointed to a recent RAND study (Opfer et al., 2017) that, in part, analyzed how often teachers seek classroom curriculum materials in this way. The study's authors cited that math and ELA teachers working in low-income schools consulted the internet for help with instruction at unbelievably high rates: 98% had leveraged *Google*, 80% used *Pinterest*, and 77% had visited *Teachers Pay Teachers*. In more affluent schools, the numbers are only 3–4% lower (Opfer et al., 2017, p. 40).

There has been much written about the problematic nature of textbook content. From popular press detailing this in the *New York Review of Books* (Collins, 2012) to more academic renderings like *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present* (Zinn, 2005), *Lies My Teachers Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (Loewen, 2018a), and *Teaching What Really Happened: How to Avoid the Tyranny of Textbooks and Get Students Excited About Doing History* (Loewen, 2018b), the issues of what and whose knowledge students are exposed to is of paramount importance. That students are rarely exposed to histories and perspectives of marginalized groups should be of no surprise. But that these inadequate big house publishing companies' books and select large state governments' decisions are being supplemented by misinformed, undereducated, ignorant, or even by individuals seeking to oppress certain groups should cause alarm.

Coaching Controversy

The irony was not lost on me.

standing to face me. "It's good PR, it's innovative teaching, looks good," he was showing good support, but the spiel sounded rehearsed.

"The kids are learning a lot too, and they're so into it. I'm holding myself accountable to the standards and making sure…"

"I know you are. I don't doubt your leadership and teaching," he broke in.

I narrowed my eyes slightly. "What do you think about their chosen topics?" I asked slowly.

I watched his jaw clench and his smile fade. I had found the root of this awkward exchange. A small sigh, "My son loves hockey. He loves video games. He doesn't think about stuff like this," he squared his stance at me honestly. "I don't know if he should."

There it was—some of my fears spoken aloud. When *are* children ready to tackle social justice issues? Are only some kids talking about this stuff at home?

"Do you think the topics are inappropriate? The kids chose them themselves. We're not going into gory detail. I'm keeping the classroom safe," I reassured, trying not to sound defensive or surprised.

"I know."

I breathed relief at his understanding and support.

"You're *lucky* I'm *letting* you do this. I still see it as a good learning opportunity for you and the kids."

I blinked. "Right. Thanks. Well, if you want to see what's happening you know you're welcome anytime," I retreated.

The local NAACP chapter named Stephanie as one of two recipients of their Diversity Educator of the Year for the powerful teaching she was doing in her classroom.

Even though Stephanie wrestled with how the curriculum "got away from her" and questioned how much other people could or should get involved in the curriculum, she chose to stand by her students and the topics they had chosen.

The curriculum had indeed pushed beyond the four walls of her classroom. As the curriculum entered the public sphere, parents did get more involved, and the media began paying attention. As an insider/outsider, I watched as some supportive parents (particularly about the named causes of the students) became more involved than perhaps Stephanie initially felt comfortable with or knew how to engage. And Stephanie's frustration was easy to hear when articles were written about her students without her direct input.

Not only were the students featured multiple times in the university's student newspaper (Brustoski, 2018; Doyle, 2018; Editorial Board, 2018), but the local newspaper also featured Stephanie and her innovative curriculum (Ratterman, 2018). Other people outside her classroom were telling the story of what was happening within her classroom.

Looking to students to name issues and topics that are of most concern to them is bound to raise interest from those outside the classroom. And the issues that the students named raised controversial matters. Kids undoubtedly suggest ideas that matter to them most, even when others may not think they are age-appropriate. In this case, the young peoples' concerns could be considered taboo or out of bounds for school.

A Curriculum with Legs Can Walk All Over You

My student Max strode into the classroom, reached into his backpack, and proudly presented a newspaper to me, a publication from the student body of the local university. Pictured, largely on the front page, were my three students from the Stop White Nationalism group and a headline that framed, "Community Holds 'Not in Our Town' Interest Meeting." This meeting is part of a movement that attempts to stop hate, racism, and bullying and promote safe communities. With some of my eight-year-old students and their families attending, the media was keen to pick it up as a story.

"Hey that's great!" I exclaimed, eyes widening in surprise. And anxiety.

"Wow you guys are famous!" another student cheered. A small crowd of third graders was gathering. Everyone wanted to see. Even my reluctant readers wanted to get their hands on that paper. As the students crowded around to read the article, I felt the walls squeezing in too, my pulse quickening as I tried to understand what the paper meant and how I felt about it.

I skimmed the front-page, above the fold article. As I read on to the second page, another large photo showed the boys presenting their work at the meeting. Using the boys' research on White Nationalism as an emotional attention grab to open the article, it detailed the local community's motivations in holding an interest meeting.

"*Well-done, student author*," I admitted.

Outwardly, I painted on my smile. It was a moment for celebrating learning for my students, many of whom had never even held a newspaper in their hands. I let them delight in the respect garnered from adults in the

Stephanie's willingness to take on issues that her students named is important. Her willingness to work alongside them to answer questions and help take on their most important issues takes courage. And it is worthy of awards and recognition.

But importance and courage present teachers with scenarios that open them up for challenges from colleagues, administrators, parents, and community members.

Being alongside her students meant that, as they attracted attention from the public related to their work, Stephanie was inevitably along for the ride. Her contemplations about who is in charge of the curriculum raises critical questions about emergent curriculum, especially when topics are front and center in the public sphere.

Having had my own classroom teaching experiences called into question, I felt that I could offer her some counsel on this. But, importantly, I taught in a time that seems like long before social media was so commonplace and "going viral" was not in our collective vernacular.

Whereas such concerns and how to deal with them can be transferable across the landscape of different classrooms and different schools, how a teacher makes sense of her own situation is going to be unique and deeply contextual.

Suggesting Stephanie should check out an old *Rethinking Schools* article, "How to Teach Controversial Content and Not Get Fired" (Dawson Salas, 2004), I thought it could provide Stephanie with guidance about how to approach complicated conversations and controversial content in her classroom. From either approaching administrators and parents in advance or allowing them to ask questions following student engagement, the article's

community who saw them as the inquisitive and capable futures of society they are.

Inwardly, I toiled with a gamut of emotions regarding everything from curricular boundaries to my role as an educator, equity of attention to all of my student groups, my place with social justice, and feeling exposed in my teaching—my classroom events now in print for public scrutiny. Our curriculum was alive and had grown beyond my control.

Who had seen the paper? What did my colleagues think? What did all of the families from my classroom think? How was this information about my teaching being interpreted? Did it give the impression that I was seeking recognition? That I had an agenda? That one student topic was more pertinent than another? Did it just make my class look awesome? And showcase the intellect and hard work of three boys in my room? (For which their families should receive more credit than their teacher)

premise is to prepare quality curriculum that is defensible because it meets school or district goals. Others, too, have taken on this issue. Notably Diana Hess' (2009) *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion* is a powerful resource for teachers.

Likewise, I have also suggested that teachers ought to find organizations that are bigger than themselves to lean on. In *Teaching in the Cracks Openings and Opportunities for Student-Centered, Action-Focused Curriculum* (Schultz, 2017), I highlighted how experienced teachers and former students have leveraged national organizations to help them with provocative curricular endeavors. Some of these organizations include: Facing History and Ourselves (facinghistory.org), Mikva Challenge (mikvachallenge.org), and Southern Poverty Law Center's Learning for Justice (tolerance.org).

The polyvocal vignettes provide a glimpse into our perspectives about Stephanie's changing pedagogy that allowed her third-grade students to engage in months-long, sustained projects ripe with issues related to justice and equity. These narratives also provide insights into how others reacted to the curricular changes. The analysis that follows is organized by the following themes that emerge from the vignettes and the overall experience: students' agency and providing classroom space for engagement, complications and aversions to framing curriculum as "social justice," and pedagogical agility amidst curricular rigidity.

Students' Agency and Providing Classroom Space for Engagement

Stephanie's relationships with children and her confidence in the classroom provided a platform to envision an alternative approach to curriculum. In fact, Stephanie corrects some of the ways in which Natalie Wexler (2019) argued that elementary education has gone terribly wrong. In this alternative approach, Stephanie's students engaged in problem-solving and decision-making around topics they felt were important and worthwhile (Schubert, 1986). Brian came into the classroom as an admitted outsider but with teaching experiences engaging in emergent problem-oriented (Schultz, 2017, 2018) and culturally relevant curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 2009) in both the late elementary/middle school and university settings. Although new to her pedagogical repertoire, Stephanie supported and embraced a classroom culture where students

became willing participants to name issues important to them, think about alternative solutions to these problems, and subsequently engage in action to bring awareness to solve the matters at hand.

In providing this classroom space, Stephanie engaged in a transformation from previous practices as a teacher who led the classroom to one who worked alongside students and honored the capacities of young people under her charge. Importantly, this is not to infer that Stephanie did not previously see the deep potential of the students in her classroom, but rather that her previous pedagogical assumptions and her approaches to teaching were situated in a skill-based context. Stephanie had good classroom sensibilities but often felt confined to district-purchased curriculum that she would adjust to include learning games, tactile experiences, and inquiry-based tasks, instead of more worksheets. Though her improved lessons were more engaging to students and included rigor through their open-ended, inquiry-based nature, they were still somewhat canned lessons, removed from authentic experiences, designed to teach students skills for their future lives, rather than allowing students to learn through actual experiences in the present. Further, she thought, this was the way to provide accountability for students and teachers on state assessments.

But her pivot—where Stephanie maintains many of the practices she has come to know and do well with children while moving towards a more holistic, empowering, and emergent way of thinking about herself as teacher and the ways that students could make meaning of and generate content in the classroom—is quite powerful. This is seen particularly when thinking about how Stephanie transitions from a skill-driven to knowledge-rich and knowledge-producing classroom culture. It is in this classroom culture that the complicatedness to the aversions about the naming of this approach to teaching and learning as justice-oriented become more apparent.

Likewise, Stephanie is empathetic to the hesitations of her colleagues and principal about the work in which she is engaging. She even joins them in some of their curricular doubting. From her narratives, we see that Stephanie's principal sees the curriculum work as a professional and a parent. From his position, it is his duty to monitor student learning. He recognized that honoring student voice and choice in the classroom was a promising practice and so allowed Stephanie's class to proceed in constructing their own knowledge and curriculum. He too was navigating his position within the school, community, and his family while negotiating the position of justice-oriented emergent curriculum within public expectations and mandates. Stephanie's teacher colleagues face pressures because of common interpretations of accountability for student learning. This causes them, too, to naturally feel a responsibility to control curriculum. This is often exerted with skill-driven content that supposedly ensures students have been exposed to necessary skills that can demonstrate whatever is defined as mastery on state assessments.

To the principal's leadership and credit, he supported his teacher's vision and practice. He was often present in Stephanie's classroom and engaged with the students. Others from the district leadership also took note of the third graders and their teacher. The superintendent, communications director, and curriculum director all paid classroom visits to see the children in action, celebrating what they saw. This was exemplified when the students presented their work at the district's monthly Board of Education meeting.

Complications and Aversions to Framing Curriculum as "Social Justice"

Within this different approach to enacting curriculum, space was provided that allowed students agency over and input into their learning. As a result, it also challenged the dominant classroom approaches that limit what children can do in schools and resisted concerns about how

students would perform on high-stakes testing. Brian sees Stephanie as a profound example of a social justice educator—one who is engaging in the promotion of student agency, creating spaces for student problem-posing (Freire, 1970/2000), and teaching towards freedom (Ayers, 2004). He is also keen to acknowledge the perspectives and the caution offered by Stephanie when naming this kind of curriculum and the theorizing that occurs alongside it. This has challenged Brian in how he presents ideas for curriculum theorizing with teachers and university students. Likewise, it has challenged Stephanie to think about how this pedagogical pivoting has both enhanced and complicated her identity as a teacher. Indeed, it has pushed her to contemplate how to address students naming issues that may be perceived by others as controversial or inappropriate for students to take on within the school setting.

While engaging in this type of teaching, Stephanie had a clear aversion to calling the teaching anything labeled "social justice." As a person new to the community, Brian had not given a lot of thought to a different perspective on the subject than the one he had experienced in other places, and he had not seen this framing as a touchstone that would have been met with resistance. It was clear early on in their co-teaching endeavors, though, that Stephanie had issues with such a framing and resisted Brian's references to her teaching as such. At first this troubled Brian, and it was difficult for him to see why there was such a resistance. Something that had been so commonplace and accepted in one environment or context was, in this new space, met with what felt like contempt. To Brian, Stephanie was embodying the types of teachers he had worked hard to induct and support during his years in teacher education. He needed to better understand how to support Stephanie in her pivoting to the more emergent approaches to curriculum that she was readily moving towards, while also letting it be labeled in a way that made Stephanie comfortable. Her pushback and explicitness about "just not calling it social justice" has had an impactful and powerful effect on Brian's scaffolding, not only for Stephanie, but also for other pre-service teachers with whom he is currently working.

In order to better understand Stephanie and other teachers' resistance, we considered perceptions of curriculum neutrality and objectivity, contemplations about naming forms of curriculum, and how teaching has become politicized. It should not be a big surprise that Stephanie has an aversion to calling what is happening in her classroom social justice teaching. Clearly her colleagues show resistance to the topics and doubt whether this approach will cover the necessary and tested content. Her newfound excitement is largely dismissed by her colleagues. They doubt the shift in curricular approaches has the ability to do what the colleagues believe they are supposed to do to "teach" students. And when her colleagues leave the copies of her materials after a meeting with her, Stephanie's inclinations about their views are affirmed.

Likewise, Stephanie's supportive principal asks powerful, yet rhetorical, questions about his own child related to the curriculum topics the third graders have chosen. Not only does he make an assumption that his son would not have interests in such social topics and is simply more interested in sports and video games, but the principal also wonders out loud to Stephanie "if he should." It is in this interaction that the principal tells Stephanie she is lucky that he is allowing her to approach curriculum in this way with her students. It is also where he acts as a curricular gatekeeper who is permitting this sort of engagement to happen, a common stance of many school leaders. In these moments, the source of Stephanie's reservations and apprehension is understood more easily.

This is further compounded by other interactions with colleagues who share doubts about "doing" school this way. Although not appearing in her points-of-entry, Stephanie relayed other teachers' hesitancy about the developmental appropriateness of students as young as eight naming

topics of their concern. Are they ready to talk about such an issue? Will it harm them? Do they know enough? What if they get into those "gory" details Stephanie assures her administration she is going to avoid? Is there an appropriate time to only cover the surface topics and not dig deeper into their complicatedness? Perhaps having more questions than answers is demonstrative of the power of this form of curriculum work.

As much as there is resistance, it is in these spaces that Brian sees Stephanie as exemplifying what it means to teach in a justice-oriented space. She sees the inquisitive nature of the students and their questions as motivating and inspiring to them. She rallies behind their concerns. She supports what they find relevant. She is responsive to their ideas. She challenges dominant narratives. She opens spaces in her classroom for the students to explore, build, and do. No longer are her students merely consumers of others' knowledge. No longer are her students solely focused on facts and skills. And Stephanie is willing to delve right in. This is particularly apparent with what many considered the provocative and controversial issues related to White Nationalism and discrimination that do not provide an easy road for a teacher in a small town.

It is also in this space that Brian recognizes the complicatedness of how teachers are viewed. Teaching is Stephanie's livelihood and helps to provide for her family. Being in a politically contested area that is often divided on many issues, Stephanie knows how charged everything is, and teachers are not excused from such debates. So, whereas she is doing the work, Stephanie is understandably concerned about becoming a lightning rod simply because of the naming, which can carry notions of activism, brainwashing, partisanship, and a lack of neutrality.

Stephanie still struggles with "controlling" the curriculum. This is largely because of the accountability pressures when looking directly at mandates and state expectations, even though this approach can have students working towards the state's standards. In the current educational climate, it takes time and practice to trust that students will grow and learn when honored as conscious curriculum makers. Mandates challenge the roll of a teacher as a facilitator and weaken confidence in students as knowledge-producers. Add to this a social-justice label and political opinions, and teachers become afraid to take risks. The nature of pedagogical pivoting suggests that Stephanie still feels the tug between emergent curriculum and the skill-based curriculum most teachers feel forced to do. She knows better and understands that there is no either/or dichotomy, but the cautiousness is there when test scores and district report cards are continuously emphasized. Since this initial endeavor into emergent curriculum making with students, Stephanie feels as though she is putting her teaching reputation on the line each year. It is a change, Stephanie argues, about shifting the demands of an accountability culture into the hands of her students from her. And each year her students' curiosities drive their growth to deeper learning. So far, the community has not labeled her the "social-justice-activist teacher," and her students have shown growth on state assessments despite the emergent curriculum.

Pedagogical Agility Amidst Curricular Rigidity

In one of his narrative points of entry, Brian critiques situations in which a "lack of vetting and perhaps the inadequate content knowledge of teachers causes them to often find simple, easy to implement resources that are lacking." He also cites research that exposes ongoing and troubling content in many textbooks. Whereas his concerns should give teachers pause, Stephanie also cautions that teachers run these same risks while building curriculum alongside their students. Although curriculum has been sanitized through big house publishing and an overreliance on

outside curriculum designers with supposed expertise purporting that the materials are standards-aligned and will improve student achievement, the reality is that curriculum making can be a daunting task for anyone involved. When teachers look to their students to name what is worthwhile and co-create curriculum alongside them, there is inherent risk in contributing to errors of fact, taking an "incorrect" or at least incomplete stance on particular issues, or not creating time and space to fully understand an issue or topic. Though this point applies to both rigid, skill-based as well as emergent, inquiry-based curriculum, it is particularly important when thinking about how young people often gravitate towards controversial, in-the-news topics of the day that they are curious about or are affecting them. That students will name such provocative issues often raises concerns about what is developmentally or age appropriate. Brian argues that if students have the inclination to name such issues, they are not only motivated for engaging in the inquiry, but they also ought to also be provided with the opportunities to explore such topics in the classroom.

Having the pedagogical agility to move from the skill-acquisition oriented approach to following the named interests of students does not exempt a teacher from having, investigating, and inquiring about the necessary content knowledge in order to work alongside their students. As Stephanie did, teachers should not only dig into literature about topics in which they are not an expert or do not have deep content knowledge, but they should also consult with outside community members who do have such insights. Even better, teachers should consider bringing those very experts into the classroom community. Although not in her narratives, examples of this occurred when Stephanie brought in the county auditor or other times when she welcomed a diversity scholar and an artist to support students' inquiries. These efforts echo the call that John Dewey (1915) encouraged over 100 years ago in *School and Society* when he argued that the community needs to be involved in the school and the school in the community. No teacher is going to be the all-knowing expert about each topic their students name, nor should they be, yet there must be an expectation that, when creating spaces for students to deeply examine the issues, they gain such content knowledge.

Some of Stephanie's narratives illustrate the complicatedness of labels, both in the naming of the topics and identifying the teaching practice as justice-oriented. Would Stephanie's colleagues have balked if her students had only named discrimination or inequality instead of White Nationalism? In the three years that followed her first foray into emergent curriculum, students have named homelessness as one problem they wanted to solve, and colleagues have not hesitated to support such a cause. This begs the consideration of what is appropriate for students. If teachers stopped introducing lessons with, "Today we're going to learn about main idea," and instead with, "Today we're going to learn about what is on your minds," how does the classroom curriculum shift? How do teachers see their roles? How do they see their students? And how do students see themselves in such spaces?

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