Pedagogies and Curriculums to (Re)imagine Public Education

Transnational Tales of Hope and Resistance
We live in a time where the complex nature and implications of social, political and cultural issues for individuals and groups is increasingly clear. While this may lead some to focus on smaller and smaller units of analysis in the hope that by understanding the parts we may begin to understand the whole, this book series is premised on the strongly held view that researchers, practitioners and policy makers interested in education will increasingly need to integrate knowledge gained from a range of disciplinary and theoretical sources in order to frame and address these complex issues. A transdisciplinary approach takes account the uncertainty of knowledge and the complexity of social and cultural issues relevant to education. It acknowledges that there will be unresolved tensions and that these should be seen as productive. With this in mind, the reflexive and critical nature of cultural studies and its focus on the processes and currents that construct our daily lives has made it a central point of reference for many working in the contemporary social sciences and education.

This book series seeks to foreground transdisciplinary and cultural studies influenced scholarship with a view to building conversations, ideas and sustainable networks of knowledge that may prove crucial to the ongoing development and relevance of the field of educational studies. The series will place a premium on manuscripts that critically engage with key educational issues from a position that draws from cultural studies or demonstrates a transdisciplinary approach. This can take the form of reports of new empirical research, critical discussions and/or theoretical pieces. In addition, the series editors are particularly keen to accept work that takes as its focus issues that draw from the wider Asia Pacific region but that may have relevance more globally, however all proposals that reflect the diversity of contemporary educational research will be considered.

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Encarna Rodríguez
Editor

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Transnational Tales of Hope and Resistance

Springer
To my husband, John, a committed and loving Philadelphia public school teacher whose work reminds me everyday that the educational future of disenfranchised students depends on our ability to (re)claim the democratic promises of public education.

[public] Schools embody the dreams we have for our children. All of them. These dreams must remain public property.

Deborah Meier, *The Power of Their Ideas*
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About the Editor

Encarna Rodríguez, PhD, is associate professor of education in the Department of Educational Leadership at Saint Joseph’s University, Philadelphia, United States. She is the author of Neoliberalismo, Educación y Género: Análisis Crítico de la Reforma Educativa Española [neoliberalism, education and gender: A critical analysis of the Spanish education reform] (Madrid: La Piqueta). Her research on neoliberalism and education has been published in journals such as Educational Philosophy and Theory, Journal of Curriculum Theorizing, Revista de Educación, or Journal of Pedagogy. Her research on internationalizing teacher education has been published in Teacher Education Quarterly and Scholar-Practitioner Quarterly.
I have always believed in public education. I had no choice, really. Growing up in the poor and rural Spain of the 1960s, still under a fascist dictatorship, I soon realized that schooling was the gift of an entire generation of Spaniards that, like my parents, had entrusted education with their hopes for a better future for their children. I held this belief despite the feelings of emptiness and alienation that defined my own educational experience. As I fulfilled my parents’ dreams and achieved the education never available to them, I also unknowingly became the silent recipient of a curriculum that effectively ignored the social and political histories of those around me and conveyed a body of knowledge that was hardly relevant to the mining community in which I lived. I continued believing in public schools even as I faced my first disappointment with the notion of education as a democratic political tool. As a young professional in the new democratic Spain of the 1980s, I enthusiastically embraced the new socialist education reform promising to prepare the new generation of Spaniards to reject the authoritarian propositions that sustained the former dictatorial regime and to educate active participants in the consolidation of the new democratic regime. With an emphasis on compulsory education until age 16 (formerly 14), this reform achieved important goals such as the inclusion of students with special needs in all public schools and universal access to kindergarten. Predictably, however, it also carried the disillusions germane to those political processes that generate almost boundless expectations for social change and I learned that, despite the great commitment generated, the changes implemented by the reform still failed many of the students for whom school has traditionally been an unattractive, or perhaps more accurately, a cryptic proposition.

My belief in public education also survived the critical analyses of schooling I encountered when entering academia. As I tried to articulate my expectations for education in this milieu, I became keenly aware that any kind of democratic expectation for schools requires a high degree of tolerance to political, intellectual, and personal uncertainty. In the world of the “posts” (postmodernism, poststructuralism,
postcolonialism et al.), I quickly learned, our views are never neutral or unproblematic, no matter how badly we want them to be. Rather, they always represent subject positions in which the view of the world we construct is inevitably linked to the relations of power that define who we are in relation to others (Giroux 1991; Rose 1996; Foucault 1991; Peters 1996; Silva 2001; Weedon 1987). Thus, those who inspired me to see education as a democratic project, also pushed me to see the many ways in which school reproduces inequality (Apple 2001; Anyon 2006; Gordon and Nocon 2008; Rogers 2006), and to understand the complexities of the identities public education generates (Perry et al. 2003; Tatum 1997; Valenzuela 1999; Willis 1981). They further inspired me to see curriculum as a discursive text that we need to decipher (Alba et al. 2000; Hendry 2011; Joseph 2011; Slattery 1995), to understand ourselves in relation to the larger historical context we occupy, and to interrogate the relations of power upon which we construct our view of the world (McIntyre 2000; Tabulawa 2003; Woo and Simmons 2008). These analyses warned me of the danger of charging schools with the democratic expectations societies are unwilling to fulfill. Paradoxically, they also strengthened my belief in public education as I understood that schools can be a precious social space in which to explore the tensions and possibilities involved in our necessarily imperfect but also full-of-promises democratic regimes. I willingly embraced uncertainty and subjectivity as rich soils for my personal search for more democratic conceptions of education and I eventually found intellectual solace in the understanding that advocating for public education was a delicate act of reclaiming schools as places for democratic dreams while unrelentingly denouncing the multiple and complex ways in which these institutions fail to achieve such dreams.

Should the tensions between school and democracy have been the main definers of my work and of my sense of advocacy, this book would have never been written. I would have kept laboring on the possibilities offered by this space and continued telling my students how important it is to keep our democratic imagination alive and to imagine a brighter future for all students. Increasingly, however, I understood that the difficulties in advancing more equitable forms of education no longer rested on the intrinsic challenges informing the very notion of education as a fundamental democratic endeavor but, rather, on addressing these challenges under new private visions of the public. Siding with the democratic traditions of education that conceptualize schools as government-sponsored public spaces working toward the public good (Cochran-Smith 1991; Dewey 1916/1997; Freire 1994), I have always taken for granted the publicness of public education and, consequently, the publicness of my own advocacy. I assumed, naively considering the current educational landscape, that the only possible referents of our democratic imagination were the notions of the public and the public good. I was willing to explore the multiple and complex ways in which these referents are imperfect and, many times, problematic. For all the uncertainties we face in education, the only undisputable assumption that remained with me was the public ground of my imagination. My encounter during the last decade with current educational policies that promote competition and privatization proved this assumption wrong and convinced me that we can no longer assume the publicness of public education or of our democratic imagination.
Furthermore, this encounter has convinced me that the logic of the market so enthusiastically embraced in current policies has quietly, but powerfully, redefined the notion of the public and the public good as private visions of education that render issues of democracy irrelevant or confine these issues to the realm of the individual.

This redefinition is evident in the increasing presence of private companies in education in highly industrialized countries such as the U.S., Britain or New Zealand and in the call of international organizations such as the World Bank to create partnerships with private schools in countries with less economic resources (Ball and Youdell 2009; Klees et al. 2012). The underlying premise of this increasing presence is that private interests are legitimate public actors that work for the good of the public. Less evident but very much in need of our attention are some of the devastating consequences of current private views in education. As the following three scenarios suggest, these views are characterized by a blatant disdain for the public as the main referent for public education and a complete disregard for the effects that their efforts to equate standardization and competition to quality and democratic education have on teachers, on our understanding of the role of the state in education, and how we imagine new ways of improving schools in low-income districts.

Scenario 1- It is April, 2013 and I am teaching a week-long, intense graduate course on curriculum to aspiring school administrators at a university in Santiago, Chile. As in the previous courses that I have taught at this institution as a part of a now 10-year long university partnership, the most recurring theme in class conversations is students’ frustration with the Chile’s emphasis on a standardized assessment system. The expectations of the national curriculum have been so extensive and so specific, and the consequences of the assessment process has impacted schools so deeply, they argued, that their leadership roles as school leaders have been reduced to produce good results in the national assessment system (SIMSE). While teaching the course, I notice, as I have done in similar courses in the past, that these laments are remarkably similar to the ones I hear from graduate students in the U.S. Among these conversations this year, however, there is one specific incident narrated by one of the students that becomes particularly relevant to me as I struggle to understand the multiple spaces in which current visions of education embodying the logic of the market leave their harmful mark on educators. A young elementary school teacher imparted an emblematic classroom experience. As a fourth grade teacher of English as a foreign language in a government subsidized school serving predominantly low-income students, and as someone who believed that students’ engagement with the subject area is critical to the learning process, this teacher purposefully used teaching methods that elicited students’ participation and interaction. During a small group discussion in our seminar, she shared with us how her principal showed a strong dissatisfaction with these teaching methods. He reminded her that in order to achieve the expected results in the standardized national tests, she should align her teaching to the school’s assessment goals by using direct instruction. Unwilling to completely change her teaching practices and wishing to remain open to utilizing the space of resistance teachers have in their classroom, she continued the use of participatory methodologies but she also implemented direct
instruction when the principal and/or other school administrators visited her class. She explained to her students that there would be different teaching activities in the classroom. Some would demand their quiet attention and individual work, and others would require them to be more interactive and participative. It was not too long before she realized that, the principal, unannounced and furtively, observed her through the classroom door. Of particular concern to her was the fact that her students had also started noticing this act of surveillance and began modifying their learning behaviors when detecting the principal’s presence. Furthermore, her students, in unsolicited complicity, discreetly signaled to her the presence of the principal. There were tears in her eyes as she shared this story. The cause of her sadness was not the methodological changes she was forced to implement or even the danger of losing her job (she had already decided she would look for a different school the following year). Rather, what caused her tears was the realization that by continuing to utilize the teaching methods she felt would be more beneficial to her students, she had also unintentionally taught her students to “lie” to the principal. Her testimony reflected her willingness to play according to the current logic of accountability and to engage in the methodological schizophrenia that would allow her to maintain her teaching practices. The ethical responsibility she felt for the spontaneous involvement of students in such schizophrenia, however, was something she could not endure.

Scenario 2: While teaching this course in Chile, I continued to follow, with dismay, the implementation of the new educational policies in Spain. Not surprisingly, given the strong conservative views of the government in place in 2013, and the country’s deep economic recession, the newspapers’ headlines reflected the all too familiar budgetary cuts and the prediction that the new academic year would start with less resources, fewer teachers, and a higher student/teacher ratio. Of particular interest to me was the rationale used to foster proposed changes such as the implementation of two new national assessment tests, one to be taken after completing middle-school and the other after finishing high-school, as a requirement to enter college, and the raising of the GPA required to qualify for university scholarships. The justification presented for these proposals was the need to create a culture of “individual effort” (la cultura del esfuerzo) that, according to the government, youth no longer have. Only students who demonstrate a strong personal drive for education, this rationale argued, should attend college and benefit from financial scholarships. The fallacy of this rationale is not lost on people like me who experienced this “new” culture of individual effort as a part of the everyday life of working-class families who counted on the efforts of their children to achieve the monetary help the government was trying to considerably reduce. Nonetheless, this fallacy worked as an enticing argument to move away from social equality and to promote more elitist positions that would secure the social advantage of those who have access to better education from birth. In the spirit of this reasoning, and despite the signs of discontent among many Spaniards, the government compellingly redefined success in education as a matter of individual effort. This redefinition renders administration, structural, and policy issues completely irrelevant. Furthermore, it effectively exonerates the responsibility of the state in this success by blaming students for all the failures.
Scenario 3- Returning from my trip to Chile to Philadelphia, the place I have been calling home for over a decade, I read about the draconian budget cuts for the next school year. I also read about the demand of the state of Pennsylvania that the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, the local teachers’ union, relinquish benefits such as seniority in order for the Philadelphia district to receive state funds. Like most school districts in large urban areas in the U.S., Philadelphia serves mostly low-income students of color (55% African Americans, 19% Latinos, 14% Caucasians, 8% Asians/Pacific Islanders, 5% Multiracial and 0.18% Native Americans, according to the district’s website on December, 2012). The recent history of the schools in the city has been shaped by two distinctive features, namely, the state-controlled management of the district and the large number of schools under the management of private organizations, particularly charter schools. In 2001, and after a confrontation with the former superintendent over his bold request for substantially increased state funds for schools, the state of Pennsylvania passed a law by which the city schools were to be controlled, both financially and educationally, by a committee of five people. Three of these members were to be nominated by the state and the other two by the city of Philadelphia. This School Reform Commission (SRC), as this group was named, soon decided that the best way to address the economic crisis in the district and to improve students’ learning outcomes was to open the schools to private providers. This measure effectively made Philadelphia the leading city in the movement toward privatization. Indeed, by December 2012, according to the district’s website, 84 of Philadelphia’s 242 schools were charter schools.

Always justified by the need to address the fiscal “crisis” of the district, this trend continued through the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act. In more recent years and echoing the Obama administration’s support for charter schools, this focus on privatization led to the opening of an increasing number of these schools. In December, 2012, for example, the School Reform Commission released and endorsed the fiscal study it had commissioned to the Boston Consulting Group. The results suggested massive closures of schools and management changes for low-performing schools. While this decision was implemented, the School Reform Commission continued to allocate larger amounts of money to charter providers and predicted that 40% of students in the city would attend charter schools by 2017. As I returned to Philadelphia, this budgetary crisis of unprecedented dimensions had taken full shape and the school district’s superintendent announced the closing of 24 schools. He unveiled a budgetary plan for the year 2013–2014 that he himself described as “catastrophic” and that involved massive firing of teachers and school staff (3700 employees were laid off by August 2013). It further involved the prediction that in most schools the new academic year would start with fewer teachers, no counselors, no administrative assistants, no vice-principals, and no hallway aids. Of crucial interest to our reflection on how private interests have provided new referents to our educational imagination is the observation that, besides the work of local activist organizations, there has been no public uproar about the prospect of educating students in Philadelphia in schools that question not only the very notion of public education but, equally important, whether what they are offering could be considered “education” in the first place.