

Curriculum Standpoint for Social Justice: Understanding the Politics of School Knowledge

Punto de Vista Curricular para la Justicia Social: Comprender la Política del Conocimiento Escolar

Wayne Au *

University of Washington, EEUU

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RESUMEN:

This conceptual paper argues for the need for us to understand the relationship between curriculum and social justice, largely through the lens of what the author calls “curricular standpoint.” This framing helps define the connective tissue of how social, cultural, institutional, economic, and political context manifest within the struggle over knowledge, including which knowledge gets framed as commonsense and hegemonic through things like textbooks, state standards, and high-stakes exams – thereby also implicated student consciousness about the world. Drawing on Feminist Standpoint Theory, this paper ultimately argues that, if we can fully recognize the extent to which social relations manifest in school knowledge, we also create the conditions for a critical examination of that knowledge as well as the possibilities for the development of increased critical consciousness about the curriculum and society – thus detailing the relationship between curriculum and social justice.

KEYWORDS:

Curriculum
Justicia social
Teoría del punto de vista
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ABSTRACT:

Este documento conceptual defiende la necesidad de que entendamos la relación entre el currículo y la justicia social, en gran medida a través de la lente de lo que el autor llama “punto de vista curricular”. Este marco ayuda a definir el tejido conectivo de cómo se manifiesta el contexto social, cultural, institucional, económico y político dentro de la lucha por el conocimiento, incluido qué conocimiento se enmarca como de sentido común y hegemónico a través de cosas como libros de texto, estándares estatales y exámenes de alto riesgo. Por lo tanto, también implicó la conciencia de los estudiantes sobre el mundo. Basándose en la Teoría del Punto de Vista Feminista, este artículo argumenta en última instancia que, si podemos reconocer plenamente hasta qué punto las relaciones sociales se manifiestan en el conocimiento escolar, también creamos las condiciones para un examen crítico de ese conocimiento, así como las posibilidades para el desarrollo de un mayor conocimiento. conciencia crítica sobre el currículo y la sociedad, detallando así la relación entre el currículo y la justicia social.

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1. Introduction

Different social, cultural, political, and economic forces have struggled over the content of school curriculum in the United States for well over 100 years (Kliebard, 2004), and historically this struggle has been dominated by the interests of capital (Au, 2023) as well as white men in universities (Au et al., 2016; Brown & Au, 2014). Currently, here in the United States, we are experiencing the most recent round of this struggle, where a renaissance in neo-fascist attacks on school curriculum has taken place. Framing themselves as “anti-woke,” extreme conservatives have been advancing a white supremacist, heterosexual agenda in schools with alarming speed and effectiveness by pushing through state laws and district policies that promote patriotism and white-heterosexual history while simultaneously banning that is anti-racist or supportive of the LGBTQT community (Ellis & Sanchez, 2021; Hagopian, 2023; Ronan, 2021)

This most recent round of this neo-fascist retrenchment in the curriculum was sparked by the *1619 Project* (The New York Times, 2019). This collection of materials and essays was developed by journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, and it centers the legacy of slavery and the influences Black Americans in U.S. History. The *1619 Project* quickly became a favorite target of right-wing conservatives, including former President Donald Trump, who claimed that the *Project* would teach children to hate America because it included how chattel slavery and anti-Black racism have been key aspects of U.S. history. Pushing the specter of left wing indoctrination, several states subsequently sought to pass bills banning the *1619 Project* from being taught in schools (Schwartz, 2021). Since then, conservatives turned their sights on Critical Race Theory (CRT) in particular as the educational bogeyman that threatens to ruin America. At least 42 U.S. states have attempted to pass laws banning CRT as well as a slew of other ideas that, while not really part of CRT, are associated with racial equality, gender equality, LGBTQT equality, and movements for justice generally (Pendharkar, 2022).

As an example, in June of 2021, HB 3979 became law in the U.S. state of Texas. While this law doesn't specifically use the term, “critical race theory,” it bans teachers from teaching or discussing a current events or a “widely debated and currently controversial issue of public policy or social affair” (as quoted in, Kelley, 2021, n.p.). It also bans the teaching that anyone is “inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously” (as quoted in, Kelley, 2021, n.p.), and it specifically names that schools cannot teach the *1619 Project* (Kelley, 2021). A similar law proposed in the U.S. state of Pennsylvania:

...bars teachers from teaching or using materials that describe the United States as “fundamentally racist,” that say “merit-based systems are either racist or sexist,” or that suggest an individual “bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by members of the individual’s race or sex.” (Sanchez, 2021, n.p.)

As another example, in September of 2021, Republican lawmakers in the U.S. state of Wisconsin Assembly passed a bill that would create a civic curriculum that all schools in the state would have to follow. This bill also banned a number of words/concepts that have been grouped together as representing Critical Race Theory. While the bill is unlikely to make it into law, it is educative to see what kinds of language conservatives are fearful of appearing in classrooms. Some terms and concepts in this proposed ban include: Social and Emotional Learning, multiculturalism, anti-racism, diversity

training, equity, social justice, “woke,” abolitionist teaching, cultural competence, examine “systems,” cultural awareness, intersection and intersectionality, conscious and unconscious bias, patriarchy, and culturally responsive teaching, among a long list of other terms (Vetterkind, 2021). Other U.S. states are attempting similar bans through state superintendents’ offices or state boards of education (Sanchez, 2021), and local school boards are becoming hotbeds for conservative activist protests against CRT and justice oriented curriculum (Ellis & Sanchez, 2021; Kingkade et al., 2021). Obviously, these neo-fascist, white supremacist conservatives in the United States are very concerned about what curriculum says about national identity.

2. Curriculum and the politics of knowledge

Whether now or 100 years ago, the struggle over curriculum is ultimately based around a core question: What knowledge should our children learn in school? On the surface it is a simple question. However, in actuality it carries very fundamental social, cultural, and political implications. Anytime we ask this question we are also considering what counts as important knowledge to be learned and who has the power to determine what is important (or unimportant) (Apple, 2014). Also, what is learned in schools through curriculum is often associated with the identity of any nation, and we are seeing right now in the United States is in many ways a struggle of who we are as a country as much as it is a struggle over what is taught in schools. As such, curriculum implicates choices about what should and should not be learned vis-à-vis the inclusion and exclusion of certain knowledge, and these choices are deeply connected to broader social, political, and historical relations (Au & Apple, 2009). Curriculum is thus always an expression of social relations, just like consciousness, teaching, and learning (Au, 2018). Curriculum always takes, “particular social forms and embodies certain interests which are themselves the outcomes of continuous struggles within and among dominant and subordinate groups” (Apple, 1988, p. 193). Struggles about content, as well as explicit and implicit messages about whose perspectives on the world are valuable are implicated in curriculum, as some groups’ perspectives are valued over others (Au, 2018; Au & Apple, 2009).

Given that curriculum is an expression of social relations and struggle, then we have to accept the reality that there is no neutral or abstract curriculum. Rather, all curriculum is a social, cultural, and political struggle over whose knowledge is considered of worth, and whether or not that knowledge provides us truthful understanding of the world. In this chapter, to more deeply explain the relationship between curriculum and social justice, I develop what I call “curricular standpoint” as an intervention against status-quo, hegemonic school knowledge that, in our current system, generally functions to maintain and reproduce capitalist social relations and inequities (Au, 2023). To do so I draw on “standpoint theory” as conceived by leading critical, feminist scholars Hartsock (1998) and Harding (2004a).

3. Conceptual framework

Standpoint theory formally originated with critical, Marxist philosopher Lukacs (1971) and his concept of what he terms proletarian standpoint. For Lukacs, proletarian standpoint was an application of Marx’s analysis of how different economic classes experience alienation from labor and capitalist production in very different ways (Au, 2011; DeLissovoy, 2008). This analysis begins with a basic reality: Workers who

produce commodities are not allowed control their own labor nor are they allowed to get the full value of what they produce, whereas conversely, capitalists control the labor process and profit from the workers' labor. These different relationships with production would, as Lukacs (1971) suggests, create very different experiences with and perspectives on capitalism itself. Thus, if we were to undertake the project of understanding capitalism, we would need to take into account how different relations to capitalism would produce very different accounts of how it works (p. 164, original emphasis).

In the 1970s and 80s critical and Marxist feminist scholars drew on Lukacs' concept of proletarian standpoint to challenge both masculinist norms and regressive gender politics found in scientific research – much of which was based in philosophical positivism (Benton & Craib, 2011; Harding, 2004a). Since then, in parallel with feminism more broadly, standpoint theory has engaged with its own internal politics of intersectionality surrounding issues of race, class, nationality, and sexuality. For instance, feminists of color have critiqued earlier manifestations of standpoint theory for neglecting non-white, non-Western experiences and upholding the notion of a “universal woman” (Foley et al., 2000; Hartsock, 1998; Sandoval, 2000). Women of color have since contributed to standpoint theory in important ways. For instance, Sandoval's (2004) articulation of “oppositional consciousness,” and Collins' (2000) “Black feminist standpoint,” are considered foundational contributions to standpoint theory in ways that challenge white, Western norms.

Standpoint theory comes from the foundational understanding that power and knowledge are inseparable, and in fact “they co-constitute and co-maintain each other” (Harding, 2004a, p. 67). This happens for two reasons. One is that knowledge is communicated through language, and, as such, language itself carries power relations (Bernstein, 1977; Vygotsky, 1987). The second reason that knowledge and power are inseparable is because knowledge of the world always exists in social context, with knowledge being either validated or invalidated by those with power (Collins, 2000). We see this at work, for instance, in terms of which realities are constructed as valid with regards to the killing of Black people in the United States by the police versus how white crime suspects are treated. Black victims of police violence are typically portrayed by media and government officials as threatening, deserving of punishment, dangerous, or unstable. This is done through the spreading of messy mug shots or other images of the Black victims that visually reinforce the constructed narrative and reinforced through headlines and stories emphasizing criminal histories or poverty. Conversely, white perpetrators of crime and violence are often portrayed as more human, more stable, and less dangerous, with the crime sometimes portrayed as being an atypical behavior (Wing, 2014).

Because of differences in social, economic, political, institutional, and cultural power in the United States the media and other institutions ultimately produce narratives and construct a reality that portrays Black people in particularly racist ways and projects guilt when there is none, while also constructing a reality that projects white innocence – even when they are clearly guilty. So, when we think about how we know and understand the world, our epistemology, we have to recognize that “...there are some perspectives on society from which...the real relations of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible” (Hartsock, 1998, p. 107) because differences in power mean that the perspectives of some positions in society are favored and protected while others are demeaned and villainized. Put differently, because some

groups have more power than others, some realities are constructed as “real” while others are “fake.” This is foundational for standpoint theory.

Both Hartsock (1983, 1998) and Harding (2004a, 2004b) have articulated five central themes across the body of their work that guide standpoint theory:

- First, our experiences with material reality, which includes our social relations, structure how we understand the world in ways that both limit and enable what we “know” about that world (Harding, 2004b; Hartsock, 1998). Put differently, our social location enables us to see and understand the world more clearly with respect to our positions and places limits on our ability to immediately understand the world beyond that same position.
- Second, power relations of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and other categories of difference structure our experiences and material conditions such that the worldviews and understandings of groups in power generally contradicts and the worldviews and understandings of less powerful groups (Harding, 2004a; Hartsock, 1998). Put simply, the ruler’s view of the world will generally be oppositional to that of the ruled because of their different experiences.
- Third, the perspectives of those in power are made functional in the lives of everyone regardless of social location, because “the ruling group can be expected to structure the material relations in which all people are forced to participate” (Hartsock, 1998, p. 229) as “all are forced to live in social structures and institutions designed to serve the oppressors’ understandings of self and society” (Harding, 2004a, p. 68). This point speaks directly to Gramsci’s (1971) conception of hegemony and how those with power maintain control: Their skewed understanding of the world is imposed institutionally and constructs an understanding of reality that may contradict the reality facing the oppressed (Hartsock, 1998, p. 107). Put differently, we might say that the unequal distribution of power leads to the unequal distribution of worldviews, where those with more power can exert stronger influence on our commonsense understandings of the world, even if such commonsense understandings fundamentally operate as distorted conceptions of material reality.
- Fourth, standpoint always comes out of a struggle against the commonsense, hegemonic worldviews and understandings of those in power. In this regard, a standpoint is an achievement that arises from purposeful work against the reigning, institutionalized worldviews and understandings which generally justify and support status quo inequalities. Subsequently, a standpoint “must be struggled for against the apparent realities made ‘natural’ and ‘obvious’ by dominant institutions” (Harding, 2004a, p. 68) the activity of which, “requires both systematic analysis and the education that can only grow from political struggle to change those relations” (Hartsock, 1998, p. 229).
- Fifth and finally, the taking up of a standpoint by the less powerful carries the potential for liberation because it, “makes visible the inhumanity of relations among human beings” (Hartsock, 1998, p. 229) emphasizing that:

An oppressed group must become a group “for itself,” not just “in itself” in order for it to see the importance of engaging in political and scientific struggles to see the world from the perspective of its own lives. (Harding, 2004a, pp. 68-69)

In this way the development of a standpoint requires the development of “oppositional consciousness” (Sandoval, 2000) since those with less power create transformative ways of knowing as part of their struggle against the power relations responsible for their own oppression. Indeed, this liberatory potential of standpoint makes it dangerous to the prevailing social order – as we saw with Freire and his treatment by the Brazilian government, for instance (Au, 2018) – and therefore gives cause for the more powerful to actively seek to discredit such positions (Hill Collins, 1989).

It is critically important to recognize that we can never assume that a standpoint is simply given by one’s social location. Just because someone comes from a marginalized social location does not mean that they automatically have taken up a standpoint: People from marginalized or less powerful groups can and do maintain forms of consciousness that are regressive and function to support their own oppression, just as people from dominant groups can also develop forms of consciousness that are progressive and openly challenge their own power and privilege. Rather, a standpoint arises from conscious, resistant struggle against the prevailing and hegemonic forms of consciousness that are aligned with status quo inequalities.

4. Standpoint and “strong objectivity”

From the perspective of standpoint theory, the experiences of systematically oppressed or marginalized groups can provide the best “starting off thought” for generating “...illuminating critical questions that do not arise in thought that begins from the dominant group lives” (Harding, 2004b, p. 128) because “...marginalized lives are better places from which to start asking causal and critical questions about the social order” (Harding, 2004b, p. 130). As Hartsock (1998) explains,

...[T]he criteria for privileging some knowledges over others are ethical and political as well as purely “epistemological.”...Marx made an important claim that knowledge that takes its starting point from the lives of those who have suffered from exploitation produces better accounts of the world than that starting from the lives of dominant groups...[T]he view from the margins (defined in more heterogeneous terms) is clearer and better. (p. 80)

Standpoint can provide a sharper view of material and social relations because, “the experience of domination...provide the possibility of important new understandings of social life” (Hartsock, 1998, p. 240). As an orientation on understanding the world, standpoint thus openly acknowledges that the social location of the oppressed and marginalized (as defined by historical, social, cultural, and institutional contexts) as the best vantage point for understanding society because it can provide a more truthful view of how a society functions.

However, despite its focus on positionality and social location, standpoint theory does not argue that every individual, socially located standpoint is equally strong for understanding reality. Rather, standpoint embraces the fact that we, as individuals, are expressions of social relations, and as such we are tied historically, culturally, politically, and materially to institutions. Thus, the point isn’t to say that “all standpoints are equal,” but instead say that the position of the oppressed creates a stronger standpoint for better understanding the material reality of society. As Harding (2004b) explains, standpoint theory,

...argues against the idea that all social situations provide equally useful resources for learning about the world and against the idea that they all set equally strong limits on knowledge....Standpoint theory provides arguments for the claim that some social situations are scientifically better than others as places from which to start off knowledge projects... (p. 131)

The movement to make #BlackLivesMatter in the face of white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and police violence provides a perfect example of this. Many liberals and conservatives have argued that “all lives matter,” out of fundamentally racist feelings that somehow their views and experiences are being excluded or demeaned – that all experiences and viewpoints should matter equally, and that we shouldn’t be focusing on Black people specifically. Conversely, and consistent with standpoint theory, #BlackLivesMatter activists and supporters argue that, because the police seem to get away with killing Black people with little-to-no provocation or accountability, and because this is an issue that affects Black people disproportionately, the best way to understand how racism and white supremacy function in the United States is through the standpoint of Black people and Blackness.

#BlackLivesMatter is not to say that racism does not exist for other non-white peoples, nor is it to say that white people don’t matter. Rather, #BlackLivesMatter points out that the experiences of Black people with the police in the United States provides the sharpest and clearest view for understanding how racism and white supremacy operate institutionally and in our day-to-day experiences. To put it a bit differently, if we want to understand the realities of racism and police violence, the relatively privileged and shielded perspectives of white people will yield us a less sharp, less clear, and less truthful, perspectives on how the police operate to support institutionalized racism and white supremacy. In this way, rather than a call for a form of relativism, a standpoint is perhaps better conceived as a tool that allows for “the creation of better (more objective, more liberatory) accounts of the world” (Hartsock, 1998, p. 236).

It is important to highlight the language of “objectivity” here. It might seem contradictory that standpoint theory and its strong basis in feminism and feminist theory relies so heavily on a kind of objectivity, especially given that it emphasizes the subjectivity of social location and is grounded in the historical rejection of Western, male notions of objectivity perpetuated within the sciences. What is critical to understanding their use of “objectivity” is that these scholars acknowledge that a world exists outside of the human subjective perception of it, and that it is a world that can in fact be understood. Further, their recognition of social location illustrates the dialectical interaction between people and their environments (Au, 2011). Standpoint, as conceived here, argues that we can achieve more objective knowledge of the world by not only recognizing how our social location shapes our understanding of the world, but by also explicitly reflecting on that location in the process of learning. Harding (2004b) calls this “strong objectivity,” explaining that:

Strong objectivity requires that the subject of knowledge be placed on the same critical, causal plane as the objects of knowledge. Thus, strong objectivity requires what we can think of as “strong reflexivity.” This is because culturewide (or nearly culturewide) beliefs function as evidence at every stage of scientific inquiry: in the selection of problems, the formation of hypotheses, the design of research (including the organization of research communities), the collection of data, the interpretation and sorting of data, decisions about when to stop research, the way results of research are reported, and so on. The subject of knowledge—the individual and the historically located social community whose unexamined beliefs its members are likely to hold “unknowingly,” so to speak—must be

considered as part of the object of knowledge from the perspective of scientific method. (p. 136)

Strong objectivity means that we gain better, clearer, and more truthful, more strongly objective, knowledge of social and material realities of the world from the achievement of a standpoint because we critically examine the process of understanding something as much as we critically examine the thing itself (Harding, 2004b, p. 137).

Again, taking the same #BlackLivesMatter example as discussed above: If we are trying to understand how racism, white supremacy, and police violence function in the U.S., then to be strongly objective in that context means, in addition to understanding racism, white supremacy, and police violence themselves, we also need to consider our very lens for learning about it. In this view, where we look for information, who we ask for information, who is asking/looking for information, and what kinds of questions we decide to ask to get information are just as important as the information itself.

5. Application and discussion: Curriculum standpoint

Standpoint theory has been little used in educational theorizing and practice, and I have discussed its use (see, Au, 2012, 2018). What is critical is that, when applied to curriculum, standpoint theory offers us a tool for understanding the relationship between curriculum and social justice. Here I map standpoint theory into curriculum studies to articulate what I refer to as the principles of curriculum standpoint.

First, curriculum standpoint recognizes that curriculum is an extension and expression of material and social relations. Textbook companies, non-profit organizations, parents, business groups, school boards, state and federal education committees, politicians, school principals, school departments, and individual teachers all have differing levels of interests in, and control over, curriculum (Au, 2023). This means that whatever knowledge is taught in schools is entangled with every aspect of power and politics we see in society (much as I discussed regarding current Rightist attacks on school knowledge earlier in this paper). In this same sense, those with more resources and power are positioned to try and influence what curriculum is taught in schools. Curriculum standpoint embraces this reality, understanding that curriculum itself is imbued with the social locations of its authors, designers, or sponsors (e.g., major corporations), and as such curriculum creates potentialities for understanding the world more clearly or in more obscurity relative to such locations.

A good example of this first principle of curricular standpoint can be found in the struggle over the content of the Advanced Placement (AP, hereafter) exam for African American Studies here in the United States. For those not familiar, the AP exam is a test developed and administered by the College Board, which also handles other college exams like the SAT. There are AP exams and accompanying curriculum for several different subject areas, and high school students who pass the AP exam with high enough scores can often receive college credit (not all colleges accept AP exam credits equally, however). It is important to understand that the College Board is technically a non-profit organization, but its revenues now exceed \$1 billion annually (Marquez, 2021; Rethinking Schools Editors, 2023). Suffice it to say, because of its control of college entrance exams and exams like the AP and accompanying curriculum, the College Board is a major force in high school curriculum and school politics in the United States.

As I discussed earlier in this paper, the U.S. is currently experiencing a Rightist, neo-fascist attack on school curriculum, and this has included the U.S. state of Florida. In January of 2023, the Florida Department of Education released a memo stating that the state of Florida was going to reject the African American Studies AP exam curriculum on the grounds that the exam included the themes of “Black Queer Studies, Intersectionality, Movement for Black Lives, Black Feminist Literary Thought, the Reparations Movement, and Black Struggle in the 21st Century” (Rethinking Schools Editors, 2023, n.p.). Then, at the beginning of February – which, with bitter irony, is Black History Month – the College Board officially released its new, revised African American Studies AP curriculum. Denying its revision had anything to do with Florida’s response, the College Board’s new African American Studies AP curriculum had clearly been edited to remove exactly the kind of content that Florida had complained about: Leading figures and content related to Critical Race Theory, Black Lives Matter, Intersectionality, and Black Queer Theory had disappeared from the curriculum (Hagopian, 2023; Rethinking Schools Editors, 2023). Despite its denials of making wholesale changes to the African American Studies AP curriculum in response to Florida conservatives, organizational emails indicate that the College Board lied to the public. In making those changes the College Board actively ignored their own committees of African American Studies professors who created the curriculum, and instead they gave in to the pressures of conservatives (Wall Street Journal Editorial Board, 2023). The struggle over the content of the African American Studies AP curriculum illustrates the first principle of curricular standpoint, that curriculum is an extension and expression of material and social relations, very clearly.

The second principle of curriculum standpoint is that it also recognizes how schools and school knowledge exist within institutional and social contexts, and that these contexts are themselves structured by systems of domination and rule organized hierarchically around power relations of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and other forms of socially determined difference. In this way, the curriculum knowledge asserted by groups in power generally supports status quo, hegemonic social relations and world views. This hegemonic curriculum knowledge thus often contradicts and runs counter to the world views, understandings, experiences, and curriculum knowledge advanced by oppressed groups. Put differently, the curriculum of the ruler will in many ways be oppositional to the curriculum of the ruled. Again, the example of the struggle of the African American Studies AP curriculum illustrates this second principle of curricular standpoint quite well. In this case, we can clearly see how differences in institutional power, in this case the conservative politics of officials in Florida and at the College Board, use their power to articulate status quo, hegemonic knowledge about African American studies to whitewash it and make it more palatable for conservatives.

A third principle of curriculum standpoint is that, because of unequal power relations, it also recognizes that the perspectives of those in power are made operational in generally hegemonic and commonsense forms in curriculum knowledge for everyone, regardless of social location and regardless of whether or not such perspectives are complimentary (or contradictor) to the material and social realities of students, teachers, and their communities. Put differently, the unequal distribution of power leads to the unequal distribution of curricular knowledge, where those with more power can exert stronger influence on our commonsense understandings of the world vis-à-vis the curriculum, even if such commonsense understandings fundamentally operate as distorted conceptions of how the world is working. The above example of

the African American Studies AP curriculum is also applies here. In this case, the hyper-conservative, neo-fascist politics of Florida officials influenced the College Board such that, the curriculum for Florida becomes hegemonic as the curriculum for everyone engaged with the African American Studies AP.

The fourth principle is that, because school knowledge is always embedded within dominant power relations, curriculum standpoint is more than just a “perspective.” Rather, curriculum standpoint is produced in the struggle against those very same power relations and how they manifest in curriculum knowledge. In this sense, curriculum standpoint is achieved, not given, because it arises from active, systematic, and conscious reflection on, and consideration of, the reigning, hegemonic, institutionalized forms of curricular knowledge. The fight over the content of the African American AP curriculum clearly shows that in order to gain a more truthful understanding of African American history and politics (to gain curricular standpoint), requires a conscious, political struggle within and against institutions in order to be achieved.

The fifth principle of curriculum standpoint is that, because it works to reveal unequal social and material relations, it carries the potential for liberation. In bringing those inequalities to light, curriculum standpoint is a part of a process which can contribute to the taking of action to challenge those same unequal social and material relations. Further, curriculum standpoint helps in the development of “oppositional consciousness” (Sandoval, 2000), or critical consciousness (Au, 2018). This is because curriculum standpoint creates the potential for students, teachers, and researchers to develop ways of understanding that can invoke and bolster their own resistance to status quo knowledge and relations. In turn this can develop their capacity to individually, institutionally, and socially take transformational action. In this way, the potential of human liberation embedded in curriculum standpoint moves us beyond simple critique, as it also calls upon us to reconstruct not just our knowledge of the world, but the world itself. In this sense, curriculum standpoint requires a commitment not only to critique, but also to vision and creativity. In the case of the struggle over the African American Studies curriculum, the actions of state officials in Florida and those at the College Board established a set of conditions that themselves instigated forms of critical, “oppositional consciousness” (Sandoval, 2000), as the movements to established a conservative politics of knowledge fostered resistance and moved some to activism (e.g., National Action Network, 2023).

The sixth and principle of curriculum standpoint is that it requires we seek to develop strong objectivity relative to curriculum knowledge. This requires that we reflect not only about the standpoint of knowledge itself, but also reflective about the origins, politics, and process of how knowledge makes its way into the curriculum. Indeed, curriculum standpoint is a product of strong objectivity, as it recognizes the politics of school knowledge in a way that makes the curriculum itself an object for analysis in the same way we need to analyze the knowledge contained within the curriculum. Again, following the same example, the struggle over the politics of the African American AP curriculum ultimately fosters a meta-consciousness about curriculum itself, as it invites us to reflect on the processes development and content of curriculum more generally.

There are, of course, many, many possible examples of curricular standpoint in practice. Essentially, the entire body of curriculum books offered at *Rethinking Schools*, such as *Teaching for Black Lives* (Watson et al., 2018), *Rethinking Ethnic Studies* (Cuauhtin

et al., 2019), *Rhythm and Resistance* (Christensen & Watson, 2015), and *Teaching a People's History of Abolition and the Civil War* (Sanchez, 2019), among many others, all embody curricular standpoint. Other education-activist oriented books like, *Lesson in Liberation* (Education for Liberation Network & Critical Resistance Editorial Collective, 2021) also do powerful work that challenges hegemonic knowledge in ways consistent with curricular standpoint. The curriculum collected at the Zinn Education Project (2023) is also an excellent example of curricular standpoint in practice.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued for the need for us to understand the relationship between curriculum and social justice, largely through the lens of what I call “curricular standpoint” (Au, 2012, 2018). This framing helps define the connective tissue of how social, cultural, institutional, economic, and political context manifest within the struggle over knowledge, including which knowledge gets framed as commonsense and hegemonic through things like textbooks, state standards, and high-stakes exams, thereby also implicated student consciousness about the world. In part, at the heart of my argument is the idea that, if we can fully recognize the extent to which social relations manifest in school knowledge, that also creates the conditions for a critical examination of that knowledge as well as the possibilities for the development of increased critical consciousness about the curriculum and society. In this regard, curricular standpoint is particularly important right now, given the rising poverty, increasing inequality, the white supremacist attacks and violence, government raids against immigrant communities, police violence against Black and Brown people, increasing anti-Muslim actions, and transphobic violence (Li & Qi, 2021; Moon, 2021; Pendharkar, 2022; Ronan, 2021). These are the realities that our students face in their lives, schools, and communities everyday (Au, 2017), and given those realities, it is imperative that we continue to develop curriculum standpoint – a curriculum of the oppressed, if you will – in order to both help students, teachers, and communities understand reality more critically and lay a foundation for all to become the activist change makers and leaders of mass movements of the present and future (Au, 2021).

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Brief CV of the author

Wayne Au

Professor in the School of Educational Studies at the University of Washington Bothell, and he is an editor for the social justice teaching magazine, Rethinking Schools. His work focuses on both academic and public scholarship about high-stakes testing, charter schools, teaching for social justice, and anti-racist education. Author of over 100 publications, his recent books include the 2nd edition of *Unequal By Design: High-Stakes Testing and the Standardization of Inequality* (Routledge, 2023), *Reclaiming the Multicultural Roots of the U.S. Curriculum* (co-authored, TC Press, 2016), and *Teaching for Black Lives* (co-edited, Rethinking Schools, 2018), among others. He was awarded the University of Washington Bothell Distinguished teaching Award in 2015, the William H. Watkins award for scholar activism from the Society of Professors of Education in 2017. Email: wayneau@uw.edu

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5533-7394>