

**The Real Multicultural Curriculum:  
What Happens When Students Contest Community and Curriculum**

Jolley Bruce Christman, Jody Cohen, and Pat Macpherson

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(In) any modern or postmodern society what (members of a community) share is not all that they are. Community requires that they also seek agreements based as much as possible on a reasoned discourse that takes into account their different histories, symbols and traditions, and that they seek policies that enable individuals to maintain and enhance their present and multiple identities (Feinberg, 1994).

Will difference overwhelm democracy? Reassuring answers to this question do not emanate from urban comprehensive high schools where more than half of the African American and Latino students are failing and/or dropping out. Events inside and outside these schools' walls raise the stakes in the debate over whether and how an "inclusion" curriculum might challenge the Eurocentric discourse found in most classrooms. Teachers want students to get along and to understand one another's cultural heritage, but the following vignette illustrates that exploring difference is at least as difficult for adults as for the young people they hope to influence.

*At the team's planning session teachers talked about all the ways that they needed to get students ready for the workplace. Much of the discussion focused on developing a sense of responsibility about promptness, attention to detail, etc. When several African American teachers suggested that the school had "an obligation to get kids ready for the racism out there. They're going to get hit in the heads with it.", two Caucasian male teachers with graduating sons of their own talked about the deteriorating economy being an equalizer, suggesting that racism was no longer the barrier it once was and in fact minority status might be an asset. Both sets of teachers became exasperated; both felt unheard.*

*Later in the year, the principal reflected about why this team of teachers were meeting so much less frequently than they had in the past. She suggested that unresolved racial tensions among the staff that had manifested themselves in questions about teacher leadership made meetings so painful that teachers were avoiding one another. She wondered what she could do as principal to support staff in moving through and past these dilemmas.*

In fact, it is often students who bring issues of difference to the fore. When asked to articulate their concerns, they tend to name race/ethnicity and gender as well as issues of disrespect and violence that they contend with on the streets. Seldom part of the curriculum, but critical to what young people bring to the table, such concerns swirl in urban high schools.

This paper grows out of four years of work in the movement to restructure Philadelphia high schools. The central strategy of high school reform in Philadelphia has been the creation of charter schools, schools within schools. Here, as nationally, the term "charter" connotes a smaller, more coherent community of staff and students. But in this large urban district, charters refer not to privatization or alternatives for the few, but to a systemic reform effort sprouting small teaching and learning communities inside the 22 comprehensive high schools which serve the neighborhood adolescents who do not qualify for special admission magnet programs. Charters were envisioned as communities of about 12-18 teachers working with groups of 200-400 students over the four years of high school. Charters would cohere around a "home-grown" theme or focus. Teachers and students would choose charter affiliations within their schools, with the stipulation that all charters serve a heterogeneous student population. Teachers would have a charter budget for paid common planning time to talk about their students and to develop interdisciplinary curriculum and alternative instruction and assessment. Over the last four years we have worked inside five charters as ethnographers and consultants on organizational development, curriculum and pedagogy.

From our work, we have identified three tasks--**building community**, **generating knowledge about change**, and **reinventing curriculum**--as essential to charter development and, we would argue to any meaningful school reform effort. We see these tasks not as a linear series in a stage model of development, but

rather as interactive, ongoing challenges that charters must engage and contend with as they evolve.

In this paper we foreground the task of reinventing curriculum by telling stories from two charters where issues of multicultural education, more than any other concern, have challenged adults and students to re-imagine teaching and learning. These stories also illuminate the interrelationships of the three tasks. Reinventing curriculum is a community endeavor; it emerges from and deepens community. When teachers and students take one another's experience seriously, it becomes possible for them to raise questions about what's worth doing together in school and thus to take a more invested stance toward the both the community and the knowledge they are creating.

In this first charter story we hear students voice their concerns; then we look at how teachers reconfiguring curriculum as a work-in-progress are moving to address these concerns:

**The Tourism Charter at Lancaster High School** *Lancaster High School is a small (approximately 1,000 students) comprehensive high school in a decayed industrial section of the city. Although the community immediately surrounding the school is primarily white working class and poor, approximately equal numbers of Caucasian and Latino students and a growing number of Asians attend Lancaster; African American students are fewer in number. Students of color travel through hostile turf to the school, which is situated six blocks south of the city's elevated subway, a clear demarcation between the Caucasian and Latino communities.*

*In the spring of the charter's first year University "outsiders" worked with charter teachers to develop a four year curriculum. They urged teachers to think "academically" and to imagine a curriculum which had an "intellectually rich" core and suggested putting American History at the center of a curricular web. Teachers brainstormed activities and the university people wrote up a broad outline which reflected the charter's summer work. But these curricula were never implemented. Disjointed rosters, late personnel assignments, the daily crush of school life, and teachers' inexperience with such collaboration and resistance to such change posed insurmountable obstacles.*

*In the mean time racial tensions heightened in the neighborhood. Many Latino males expressed fear about traveling to and from school, and talk in a Family Group focused on this. Several Latinos were chased from the neighborhood when they visited two Caucasian girls who lived near school. In a Community Service debriefing session, Julio expressed his anger at the racist epithets used by a third grader in the classroom where he served as an assistant and at the teacher's failure to intervene. Julio's Caucasian teacher urged him to consider such an incident as "a good reason for you to work there and show those students how not to treat each other badly." Julio asked, "How can I teach them that when their own teacher not doing anything about it?" Another reflected, "This ain't community service cause this ain't my community. If this were community service it would be round my way."*

*From its inception, Tourism had talked about using the neighborhood as a resource. In the first year it had offered the community service course as a way to "boost (9th graders') confidence and self-esteem by giving them the opportunity to help someone else." Despite the charter's disappointment that it had not been able to pull off the widespread interdisciplinarity originally envisioned, several teachers remained determined to pull together various strands of charter thinking--multicultural issues, community service, and neighborhood history--into a coherent course offering. With university support, they got a grant for an industrial history project in which 30 students would map industrial sites, collect artifacts from the neighborhood, and prepare a display for the community. Regular and special ed students in the community industrial history course have engaged in a walking industrial architecture tour, an interview with the mayor about his economic development plan for the community, and projects such as oral histories and film-making.*

In this story we see how the dangerous ambiguity of "community" for these students and their teachers raises ripe, important questions about the borderlands they occupy but have seldom examined in school. The new curriculum was not a perfect match with students' felt needs. Latino students did not want to walk through a neighborhood where men emerged from bars to watch their uneasy march. This walk required that they become anthropologists of this community where deindustrialization had set one working class culture against another. Talking with the mayor about local dilemmas addressed the chronic severance of learning from doing but ran the risk of teaching students about economic devastation without tools

for enacting change. Students invited to ask questions about their classes, their teachers, their own and their peers' experiences of school may pose issues and collect data that question, challenge and criticize the status quo. In some charters individual teachers invite critique from students inside their classrooms. But many teachers resist hearing students' perspectives on their education. Charter teachers must build a level of trust and commitment to change before the necessity of student input can be seen and acted on. How to listen to students' voices and how to position inquiry for organizational learning become the charter's next challenges.

In the Tourism Charter, as in other charters across the city, the most meaningful changes in curriculum and instruction have evolved, sprouting through the cracks of school culture and bureaucratic constraint. But such changes have remained fragile, existing in a corner for only a minority of students and subject to roster changes and temporary funding streams. Unresolved questions include: How can this demanding, localized work have staying power and fan out to include more teachers and students in charter communities and become central to charter identity? How can professional networks such as universities and cultural organizations support and sustain the ongoing work of building curriculum?

The second charter story highlights issues raised in urban public schools which are inhabited by increasing numbers of African-American, Latino, Asian, and Native American students who are often still taught by Caucasians who may also be different from their students by class and neighborhood. In such situations adults learning **from** their students in order to better teach them becomes a particularly critical step in reinventing school as a place for meaningful teaching and learning.

**Inquiry Charter at Marshall High School** *On a Monday morning in early February, Charter staff met with ad hoc student representatives. The students were African-American males, except a young woman documenting the process for the student research group. The staff was mixed by gender and predominantly Caucasian. Kurt, a tall senior spoke up: "We want more Black studies in social science and history classes, this month especially. We don't want a complete make-over of the curriculum, we want how Blacks tie into what's already being taught." Lawrence added, "The 11th graders can work with teachers to get a fourth history class here."*

*This meeting was the culmination of several weeks of student organizing to address what was conceived as an imbalance in their curriculum. Students active in the dilemma had pursued several tacks: many had drafted and signed petitions; that morning a number had staged a walk out of social science and history classes, and were joined "in support" by others whose classroom doors had been tapped along the way; representatives met now with the full staff to discuss their concerns.*

*Rashid ticked off the arguments: "If we don't know about slavery it could happen again. . . We need to know more about Blacks as a whole. Like Martin Luther King, the history books focus on the 'I Have a Dream' speech but not how Kennedy and them used him. If we know this, history students in the charter and even in the city and the whole country could unite."*

*The lunch bell rang, no one left. The social science teacher reported that she'd begun negotiating with a class to do "a concentrated month on African-American history" and then satisfy the state curriculum for economics in four months, "bringing in as much as possible how this is applicable to the African-American community." She seconded the suggestion for a fourth year in African-American history.*

*Social science that year included a student-selected unit on ancient Africa. Students expressed appreciation for the changed content but frustration with instruction that didn't involve them as actively as they wished. A final senior assessment focused on the work of an African-American author. The next year a Black Studies course was added to the curriculum.*

In this story we see students move from passively receiving mandated curriculum to taking an invested, critical stance with regard to what they learn. Rather than lobbying for a Black Studies course per se, these students argue for a multicultural curriculum in which students collectively construct social history by examining contradictions and analyzing connections. They express their frustrations in the context of a coherent learning community where teachers listen and negotiate curriculum. These students' ongoing concern with teaching strategies and the content of the senior assessment suggest a community seeking to braid curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Fred Newmann asks "Is the point of restructuring to provide a better way of teaching the current curriculum to students who haven't learned it? Or is the goal to fundamentally change, for all students, what is taught and how it is taught?" (1992) A student from a charter asserts, "For graduation, charter students should have to write a book or essays cause that's what they gonna ask you to do when you go to college. It should be judged on how you form the body, introduction, conclusion, and to show that you know how to do things, know how to think, know how to solve problems."

Reinventing the triad of curriculum, instruction, and assessment is at the heart of changing school. Where new curriculum has been imposed too quickly by outsiders, undermined by personnel shifts, and in other ways not given the time and circumstances to grow from community building and the generation of knowledge about change, it has not taken hold. When teachers and students involved in building community take seriously their diverse, collective experiences and knowledge as the grist for learning, they challenge the "test and text" curriculum embedded in the transmissive instruction Haberman (1991) has characterized as a "pedagogy of poverty."

Our research argues for reinvention in the Freirian sense: "(R)einventing requires from the reinventing subject a critical approach toward the practice and experience to be reinvented." Reinventing curriculum, instruction, and assessment implies seeing knowledge as constructed, constructing knowledge individually and collectively, and developing flexible intellectual frameworks so that charters can author dynamic, responsive curriculae.

Much of the current debate on curriculum and assessment revolves around proposals for national curriculum and standards. But how do proposed curriculum and standards fit with what actually engages students? Additionally, our work in charters suggests that curriculum becomes most vital as a work-in-progress sitting at the intersection of students' experiences, evolving community, and disciplined subject matter (Newmann, 1992). No matter how progressive, national standards put into place without sustained staff development that is locally empowered and inquiry-based become yet another procrustean bed, chopping off the heads and feet of teachers and their students in the name of outcomes (Fred Erickson, personal conversation, 1994). The task of reinventing curriculum is paradoxical: curriculum

implies both a body of knowledge, however revised, and at the same time a work-in-progress, a quilt being constructed from participants' identities and knowledge.

In his AEQ article, "How Culture Misdirects Multiculturalism," Murray Wax argues that educators need to "resurrect and maintain the dynamic imagery" of "culturing an organism" or "of the human organism becoming cultured." He urges us "to envision culture in dynamic terms and to perceive our responsibilities as toward culturing not only the young, but also ourselves, throughout our lives." Likewise, requisites for authentic curricular and instructional change seem to be a dynamic environment where teachers and students seek connections between students' lives, where teachers use classroom inquiry in dialectical relation to their professional knowledge, and where a critical mass of students risks an invested stance toward their own education.