

# Curriculum as a Site of Political and Cultural Conflict

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## Abstract

Schools are both political and academic institutions. This essay explains the different ways that schools generate conflict because people dispute the content of the school curriculum. This essay begins by noting that schools require the approval of political elites and the public. Without such support, schools can't operate. Also, schools lend legitimacy to particular ideas, which means that people will fight over the content of classroom instruction. The essay then discusses how social movements target schools and the factors contribute to successful curricular challenges in schools.

Prior research has focused on uncovering the inherently political nature of school curricula. These researchers produce case studies of conflict over the curriculum. Research also focuses on how political actors target schools and try to enact change. There is also a growing literature on bureaucratic dynamics. Scholars now focus on the administrative response to protest and the demand for educational reform. I conclude by outlining new directions for research. Specifically, researchers should ask about the relationship between academic reform movements and broader social movements. For example, do most mass movements target schools? How much curricular conflict is unique to the educational system? I also suggest that researchers should examine the "spill out" of protest from schools to the larger society.

## CURRICULUM AS A SITE OF POLITICAL AND CULTURAL CONFLICT

Schools are places of conflict as well as learning. The decision to teach one topic means that other topics are not taught. For this reason, the curriculum, what teachers and professors choose for their classes, is an inherently political thing. Contention over the curriculum reflects competing social, political, and intellectual agendas. Not surprisingly, the curriculum is often the site of political struggle.

Curricular conflict has often appeared in the social science literature on schooling. The great sociologist Emile Durkheim described the different ways that church leaders tried to influence the early universities of Europe (Durkheim, 2006). Cobban (1971) later described how medieval college students staged revolts against professors who they thought were not

teaching the proper materials. Early in the twentieth century, Willard Waller (1970) wrote about the conflict between highly educated teachers and less educated parents, who fought over what happened in their children's classes. However, by the late twentieth century, much less attention was given to the curriculum by social scientists. Leading education researchers in sociology, political science, and other fields, did not pay much attention to the struggles over what was taught in schools and colleges. The study of the curriculum was treated as a question for practitioners and their allies in schools of education.

This situation reversed itself in the 1990s during the "culture wars," a time when writers and intellectuals fiercely debated the merits of school curricula. There were many issues at stake. Political liberals thought that schools devalued or marginalized the intellectual accomplishments of women and minorities (Bryson, 2005). Conservatives thought they needed to defend Western culture by insisting on the superiority of canonical works. The new attention given to the politics of school curricula encouraged social scientists to investigate the history of educational reform movements and understand how politics shapes education through the curriculum. The result is a new wave of scholarship that examines the push and pull between schools and the political forces that try to mold them.

Research on school reform and conflict resulted in a new framework for understanding how curricula are written. This new framework rests on a few key observations. First, schools are organizations. This means that schools are organized settings for accomplishing tasks, such as educating young people (Bidwell, 1965). An insight from contemporary organization theory is that bureaucracies are very sensitive to their environment because they need resources for survival. Thus, educational institutions can, in certain circumstances, be very responsive to political forces, because they are often public entities (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Second, political actors must translate their ideas into documents, policies, and classroom practices (Binder, 2002; Rojas, 2007). This gives teachers, administrators, and students another opportunity to shape school curricula.

## SCHOOLS AS ORGANIZATIONS

One of the distinctive features of educational research after the 1960s is the emphasis on the organizational context of schooling (Bidwell, 1965). One of the key arguments from that literature is that schools are often subject to the same types of influences as other organizations. They are set up as hierarchies with managers; they are subject to government regulation; and they seek legitimacy in an attempt to secure resources from their constituents (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Schools have multiple masters, which means that they attract conflict in many ways. There is top-down conflict. American public schools, for example, were subject to the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act. The federal government mandated that schools assess their performance in terms of standardized tests. This law triggered conflict over school curricula (e.g., Menken, 2006). There is also bottom-up social change. For example, college students have frequently demanded that professors teach courses on multiculturalism (Rojas, 2007; Yamane, 2001).

Educational institutions also encourage conflict because of their highly visible role in modern nations. Schools are supposed to teach what is moral and correct, they are supposed to train people for the labor force, they certify who may hold certain jobs, and they create distinctions and honor within society. Not surprisingly, schools attract criticism from many quarters. Some political movements claim that schools are immoral and need to teach religious values (e.g., social conservatives). Other movements want a particular group to be represented in the curriculum (e.g., ethnic studies activists). These critics often focus on the curriculum because that is what students are exposed to in the classroom.

#### POINTS OF CONTACT BETWEEN THE POLITICAL AND EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS

This admittedly brief sketch of school politics indicates the different ways that political activists try to alter or change curricula. Some political movements opt to work through the state. Political activists want government officials to mandate that certain ideas be taught. This is a highly effective tactic in some regions. For example, the State of Texas chooses textbooks for the entire public school system. This system for selecting textbooks creates a large incentive for political conflict. Those who can influence the state's textbook committee can reach millions of children. Another tactic is for activists to win election or appointment to the state's educational bureaucracy. This is a common tactic among American social conservatives, who often sit on local school boards and try to have their school adopt textbooks with sympathetic points of view.

In contrast, other movements opt to work "from the bottom up." Rather than take control of the state educational bureaucracy, they recruit students and instructors. This coalition may work in a variety of ways. They may stage a college campus protest, or they may produce a rival textbook.

There is a third source of conflict. The desire for curricular change may come from within the teaching profession. Conflict over the curriculum may erupt when educators promote a new method or topic. For example, some American language arts instructors in the 1990s believed that reading was best

taught through “whole language” methods, which was, for some students, superior to phonics. Once whole language gained some popularity among teachers and policy makers, there was a contentious debate.

#### WHERE AND HOW THE CONFLICT HAPPENS

The struggle over school curricula can happen at many sites. First, political actors may focus on teaching materials. Numerous studies examine how different people try to have their ideas represented in textbooks. One strategy is simply to write a new textbook. This is a very common tactic employed by movements that have a heavy investment in education. For example, there are pro-Creationist textbooks, pro-Afrocentric textbooks, textbooks that represent a “people’s” perspective on history, and so forth (Binder, 2002). Another strategy is to insist that existing texts be modified and that instructors “teach the controversy” rather than exclude a particular idea (Graff, 1993).

Second, curricular conflict may happen within an educational bureaucracy. As noted before, political movements may seek to hold power over schools through elected positions. Indeed, many of the most notorious curricular disputes in American education involved elected leaders, such as the 1925 Scopes monkey trial and 1996 Ebonics controversy. In each case, the board of education sought to influence what was taught in schools. In the former case, there was an attempt to prohibit the teaching of evolution. In the latter case, Oakland city officials suggested that it might be valuable for teachers to legitimize Black Vernacular English. Educational officials are often lobbied by others as well. For example, conservative activists in recent years have asked that colleges have a “balanced curriculum” presenting their views (Binder & Wood, 2012).

Third, curricular conflict may happen within schools, inside classrooms, and faculty lounges. The dispute may be mild in character, as teachers or professors debate the need for new ideas or pedagogical practices. In other cases, the dispute may be extremely contentious. The 1960s provide many vivid examples of college campus protests. A common complaint was that the college curriculum was either racist or sexist, and needed to include more material by women and minorities. These protests could escalate dramatically, leading to riots and campus shut downs (Rojas, 2006, 2007, 2010).

Fourth, the curriculum may be discussed in the broader public sphere. Intellectuals, the media, and politicians may choose to focus on what is taught in schools. The 1990s provided an excellent example of this type of conflict. The “culture wars” were essentially an argument about the validity of minority

culture (e.g., Bryson, 2005; Graff, 1993). Some argued that books by minorities deserved a place next to the classic texts of Western civilization. There were others who argued that the notion of “canon,” a list of books that merited continued study because of their impact and excellence, was biased in favor of European culture. Pushing back against this argument, traditionalists published a number of books arguing in favor of a canon and questioning the authors that were proposed to be part of a new canon. While many scholars took part in these arguments, so did many policy makers and “public intellectuals.”

### OUTCOMES OF CONFLICT

The outcomes of curricular conflict are diverse. The party in a curricular conflict may achieve much, or all, of what they wanted. Darwinian biologists are one example of an extremely successful actor in a curricular conflict. At first, Darwinian theory was strongly opposed by intellectual and educational elites. However, by the mid twentieth century Darwinian theory was dominant not only in professional biology, but also in most schools and colleges. The success of Darwinian biology in American education is so overwhelming that skeptics have had to set up their own schools outside of the mainstream school and university system.

Then, there are cases where the impact was moderately successful. Ethnic studies in post-secondary education is one such example. Students succeeded in having Ethnic Studies established as a legitimate, if controversial, discipline within the university system. However, relatively few universities adopted Ethnic Studies programs and most of them are concentrated in wealthier, higher status research universities. Furthermore, enrollment in Ethnic Studies majors remains very low (Rojas, 2007).

Then, there are cases where reformers fail to achieve much noticeable level of success. Recently, the intelligent design movement has argued that physical scientists should teach the idea that the biological organisms, and other complicated natural phenomena, may be due to conscious design, an idea at odds with contemporary biology or astronomy. So far, these ideas are rarely found in mainstream schools or colleges. The stigma attached to them is so much that it is newsworthy when a university scientist reveals himself to be a proponent of intelligent design.

Much contemporary research investigates the factors that lead the success in curricular conflict. For example, numerous scholars have focused on culture (Arthur, 2011; Binder, 2002; Rojas, 2007). If a reformer can appeal to widely accepted values within a school, they are more likely to have their ideas adopted. This appeal to culture has been used to explain why creationists are not successful, while ethnic studies are somewhat more successful. In

the late twentieth century, ethnic studies reformers merely had to argue that Black history, for example, was within the scope of American history and was valuable for students. In contrast, the adoption of creationism would require that schools abandon their commitment to Darwinian biology.

Other scholars discuss tactics and strategy. In a study of college protest, it was found that nonviolent tactics were more likely to lead to the creation of Ethnic Studies programs. The argument that was offered was that concessions to disruptive protestors delegitimized college administrators. In contrast, nonviolence balanced the need for students to have their arguments heard without making it difficult for administrators to maintain a semblance of control over the campus.

### RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Despite the growth in studies of curricular disputes at the primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels, there are important unanswered questions. First, very little attention has been given to the genesis of curricular conflict. Sometimes, curricular conflict follows broader social trends. The fight over creationism is one theater in a larger political dispute in America between modernists and Biblical literalists. However, there are other sources of curricular conflict, such as marginalized intellectuals. How successful are non-educators in influencing the content of curricula? This is a largely unanswered question in the social science literature, which is surprising given that think tanks routinely promote educational reform.

Second, there is relatively little analysis of the discursive elements of curricular conflict. That is, we have very little evidence about the ways that educators, intellectuals, and students talk about the need to change the curriculum. Given that cultural resonance is such an important factor in the settlement of curricular disputes, it is surprising that little attention has been given to how people talk about school reform.

Third, there needs to be much more attention given to the effects of curricular conflict on the rest of society. Once again, multiculturalism provides an insightful example. The dispute over the Western canon resulted in highly charged debates in the mass media. To some extent, multiculturalism was a successful reform effort. It is somewhat common for colleges to have multicultural course requirements and many professors use multiculturalist materials in other courses. There is surprisingly little research on the long-term impact of these courses. Some studies measure the increase in liberal attitudes among students enrolled in multicultural course, but they do not compare them with similar students who did not take the course, nor have there been any long term studies of older adults who enrolled in multicultural courses.

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