



Historically consciousness curriculum inquiry

Rebecca Cairns¹

Published online: 12 April 2023
© The Author(s) 2023

Keywords Curriculum inquiry · Historical consciousness · Decolonising curriculum

The considerable momentum propelling the regeneration of the curriculum inquiry field in Australia and extending transnational curriculum inquiry across and beyond international borders means it is an exciting yet challenging time to be doing curriculum inquiry. Leading curriculum scholars are questioning the current state of curriculum inquiry in Australia (Green, 2018; Kennedy, 2022; Yates, 2018) and, more broadly, the role of curriculum scholarship in uncertain times (Green et al., 2021; Pinar, 2021; Priestley & Philippou, 2018). Initiating discussion about the regeneration of Australian curriculum scholarship in this journal 5 years ago, Green (2018) explains: ‘That notion of ‘regeneration’ is intended to invoke at once a sense of re-energising and renewing and the idea of generations itself— in this case, different generations of curriculum workers and thinkers, over time’ (p. 67). Yates (2018) concurs, ‘it requires not only a take-up by new generations of scholars, and the recognition of new kinds of questions, but also attention to prevailing conditions both in education faculties and in schools’ (p. 86). From a Latin American perspective, Johnson-Mardones (2018) acknowledges the importance of ‘intergenerational and intercultural dialogue’ in developing curriculum as an international conversation ‘informed by distinct intellectual histories and present circumstance’ (p. 7). As a curriculum inquiry researcher who represents a newer generation of curriculum scholars, I will reflect on the value of engaging one’s historical consciousness for the purpose of listening to curriculum voices across generations and borders. While as a scholar and former history teacher whose research has centered on history curriculum I am naturally drawn to thinking about and situating the field

of curriculum inquiry within its historical context, this approach can be generative for contemplating how the intersection of these histories and contemporary conditions shape new questions and reanimate existing ones.

For our purposes, historical consciousness can be conceptualised ‘as a process by which people understand the links between past, present, and future to position themselves in time’ (Popa, 2022, p. 172). Being able to locate ourselves, other curriculum scholars, curriculum actors, and curriculum discourses in time and apply understandings of the past-present-future nexus as a lens for curriculum inquiry has parallels with, but is not the same as, doing curriculum history, which has a more distinct position within the field of curriculum studies. Here, I will explore the notion that activating one’s historical consciousness while doing curriculum inquiry for the purpose of investigating contemporary curricular problems can offer new insights into the state of the field and one’s own position within it.

As we come into being with the field, we look to current and previous generations of curriculum scholars to understand the traditions and debates to get a sense of the way they are embedded in national cultures and augmented through international conversations (Johnson-Mardones, 2018). To appreciate how curriculum inquiry is moving forward—or stagnating as the case may be—it is helpful for emerging scholars to establish a theoretical concept map of sorts, spanning, for example, the Tylerists, reconceptualists, critical curriculum theorists, neo-Tylerists, and key scholars from one’s own national context, as well as developments in the internationalisation, transnationalisation, and decolonialisation of curriculum inquiry. Having a historically informed sense of the field can also help us reflect on our collective blind spots. This is exemplified by the work of decolonisation and Southern theorists, who argue curriculum theory, can act to maintain but also dismantle epistemological injustices.

✉ Rebecca Cairns
r.cairns@deakin.edu.au

¹ Deakin University, Geelong, VIC, Australia

While the work of southern curriculum theorist João Paraskeva (2011, 2017, 2020) presents somewhat of a theoretical baptism of fire for the novice curriculum scholar, it offers critical insights into the notion of generational regeneration. Paraskeva (2020) critiques the work of critical curriculum theorists or *the generation of utopia*—, who ‘obsessively chased the utopia of just education and a just world’ (p. 177). Although these theorists engaged important analytic tools such as ‘ideology, power, hegemony, identity, discourse’ (Paraskeva, 2017, p. 4) and developed critical curriculum platforms that challenged dominant and counter-dominant positions, this work presented a paradox for critical curriculum scholars:

That is while on one hand counter-dominant and counter-hegemonic approaches were able to champion and coin the field politically, by denouncing curriculum as a social classed, gendered, and raced artifact intertwined with economic, cultural, and political dynamics that blatantly produce and reproduce inequality. On the other hand, such radical critical and in many cases progressive approaches ignored that their criticism of the dominant curricular mechanisms rested solely and only on a Western epistemological framework— paradoxically the same on which the model they criticized was based. (Paraskeva, 2017, p. 35)

Despite its achievements, Paraskeva (2020) argues critical curriculum theory has been unable to realise the utopia imagined, particularly during times of global unrest. He therefore calls for ‘re-thinking the utopia through re-utopianizing thinking’ in a way that has ‘respect for epistemological diversity’ (Paraskeva, 2020, p. 285). Responding to the ‘coloniality of power and knowledge’ (Paraskeva, 2011, p. 154) requires decolonial and anti-colonial responses and the use of new tools from the expansive epistemic thesaurus that exists beyond the White, Western, male, heterosexual epistemological cannon (Santos, 2007; Paraskeva, 2018). Drawing heavily on Santos’ (2007) ecology of knowledges, Paraskeva’s itinerant curriculum theory advocates for ‘replacing the monoculture of knowledge by an ecology of knowledges’ (Santos et al., 2007, p. xx).

Contemplating how to meaningfully incorporate an ecology of knowledges has been an ongoing challenge in my own curriculum inquiry. My analysis of Asia-related history curriculum practices (e.g., Cairns, 2020) and a co-authored book, *The Asia Literacy Dilemma: A curriculum perspective* (Cairns & Weinmann, 2023) draws on Asian Cultural Studies scholar, Chen’s (2010) *Asia as method* and *deimperialisation* as a theoretical framework for challenging outmoded curricular conceptualisations of Asia. Viewing Asia from ‘alternative axes of alterity’ (Yew, 2011, p. 4) is essential for disrupting the reproduction of the idea of ‘Asia’ as a colonial, orientalist

imagination, which tends to be perpetuated by historically fixed binaries such as East/West, coloniser/colonised, self/other, and so on. Considering ‘the production of knowledge about Asia has been dominated by an academic tradition founded in Western epistemologies’ (Cairns & Weinmann, 2023, p. 13), this means also being aware of how we as researchers based in Australia investigating Asia and Australia’s relationship with Asia are subjectively positioned by the historical conditions that continue to influence the reproduction of knowledge and power relations. With the aim of showing ‘respect for epistemological diversity’ (Paraskeva, 2020, p. 285) and recognising ‘global opposition to neoliberal globalization and neo-imperialism’ (Johnson-Mardones, 2018, p. 121), we seek to engage a range of analytic tools from the Global North and the Global South (see Cairns & Weinmann, 2023). Historical consciousness is essential for interrogating how Westerncentric knowledge traditions are reproduced by curriculum practices and acknowledging that—as a settler researcher in settler-colonial Australia—my own sense of place and knowledge-making practices are inherently Euro/Westerncentric and are therefore constituted by the processes and effects of the physical and epistemic violence of colonisation on Indigenous people across Australia and the Asia–Pacific region. Exercising reflexivity around individual and collective historical consciousness is necessary to address this embedded coloniality. In Chen’s (2010) words this requires ‘the colonising or imperialising population to examine the conduct, motives and desires and consequences of its imperialist history that has formed its own subjectivity’ (p. 4).

Historically conscious curriculum inquiry encourages researchers to listen out for the voices of curriculum actors in the past and think about the inclusion of different curriculum actors in the present. Looking at whose voices have been recorded within the curriculum archive can help us interpret the extent to which values and attitudes and discursive patterns change over time. For example, the back issues of subject association journals that can be found tucked away in university library compactus provide rich sources for tapping into on-the-ground curriculum practices and developing a sense of the contextual conditions of schooling over the decades. While these journals are more likely to represent the voices of highly engaged teachers and do not necessarily represent how the curriculum was enacted in schools, they provide an excellent source for analysing shifting curriculum discourses and discursive practices as they include articles from practicing teachers, academics, curriculum authorities, educational organisations, advertisements, and occasionally quotes from students. In my research on the history curriculum, I have integrated

the analysis of official curriculum documents and other education policy and academic literatures with commentary from the Victorian History Association of Victoria's (HTAV) *Agora* journal, which has been published since 1967. At times, this has provided evidence of curriculum perspectives that challenges present-day assumptions about Asia-related history curriculum and has enabled me to build a picture of the ways dominant and counter-curriculum narratives are mobilised up to the present.

As we note in our book, this approach allows us 'to trace the nascence of teaching and learning about (and of) Asia as an educational direction and establish a foundation for our overall argument about the curricularisation of Asia' (Cairns & Weinmann, 2023, p. 34). Historicising Asia as a curriculum discourse enabled us to articulate when different modes for knowing Asia are established, and contested and 'by making visible the conditions that make possible the thoughts and actions of the present' (Popkewitz, 2012, p. 2), we were able to map out a curriculum history of the present. This made the present-future possibilities and impossibilities of Asia curriculum policy more perceptible. Furthermore, when we pay attention to the voices of curriculum actors in the past, we become more attuned to those that have been and may continue to be silenced or marginalised. The tendency to undervalue the voices and perspectives of children and young people in curriculum conversations, especially beyond the classroom, is certainly something curriculum inquiry can better attend to in future (see Brennan, 2022) and is something I have begun to foreground in my own work (Cairns & Weinmann, 2021, 2023).

Historical consciousness also relates to our capacity to recognise how our own meaning-making practices might be shared or are different to others and how they are shaped by the socio-historical conditions of our own lives and the national and global processes of the past and present. Doing curriculum inquiry transnationally potentially expands one's sense of historical consciousness, as Kennedy (2010) observes: 'Transnational research forces researchers to see the other and to respond in meaningful and helpful ways to forge an alliance that can transcend the structures imposed by national mind-sets' (Kennedy, 2010, p. 900). This does not mean abandoning curriculum questions about the nation or in this context curriculum discourse in Australia, rather it challenges us to recognise 'what is uniquely Australian and what is important to all Australians' (Kennedy, 2022, p. 67) while also looking beyond national metanarratives for curriculum work to further global solidarities and actively seek out voices and viewpoints from diverse parts of the world (Green et al., 2021, Gough, 2020).

As a journal that 'supports curriculum scholarship from the global south to decolonise the curriculum and speak back to the global metropole' (2023, para. 1), *Curriculum Perspectives* provides a fertile space for all generations of curriculum inquiry researchers to contribute to the regeneration of curriculum inquiry by exercising curricular polyvocality. Historically conscious curriculum inquiry may assist those who, like me, are relatively new to the field to develop a nuanced understanding of contemporary contexts to pose new curriculum questions and invigorate the rethinking of established curriculum problems.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Brennan, M. (2022). Teachers and students as researchers: Rebuilding curriculum inquiry for the future. *Curriculum Perspectives*, 42(1), 85–89. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41297-022-00159-7>
- Cairns, R. (2020). Deimperialising Asia-related history: An Australian case study. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 50(2), 126–148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2020.1747936>
- Cairns, R., & Weinmann, M. (2021). Towards Asia 'curriculum-alived': Amplifying student voice in the Asia curricular landscape. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2021.1937056>
- Cairns, R., & Weinmann, M. (2023). *The Asia literacy dilemma: A curriculum perspective*. Routledge.
- Chen, K. H. (2010). *Asia as method*. Duke University Press.
- Curriculum Perspectives. (2023). Aims and scope. *Curriculum Perspectives*. <https://www.springer.com/journal/41297/aims-and-scope>
- Gough, N. (2020). Transnational curriculum inquiry: Building post-colonialist constituencies and solidarities. In J. C. Chi-Kin Lee & N. Gough (Eds.), *Transnational Education and Curriculum Studies: International Perspectives* (pp. 22–37). Taylor & Francis Group.
- Green, B. (2018). Introduction: Regenerating curriculum inquiry in Australia? *Curriculum Perspectives*, 38(1), 67–68. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41297-017-0034-6>
- Green, B., Roberts, P. & Brennan, M. (2021). Transnational curriculum inquiry in a changing world. In B. Green, P. Roberts & M. Brennan, *Curriculum challenges and opportunities: Transnational perspectives in curriculum inquiry* (pp.1–21). Springer

- Johnson-Mardones, D. F. (2018). *Curriculum studies as an international conversation: Educational traditions and cosmopolitanism in Latin America*. Routledge.
- Kennedy, K. (2010). Transnational research. In C. Kridel (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of curriculum studies* (pp. 899–903). Sage.
- Kennedy, K. J. (2022). A curriculum field in need of an Australian foundation: Beyond theory to situated practice. *Curriculum Perspectives*, 42(1), 65–70. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41297-022-00158-8>
- Paraskeva, J. M. (2011). *Conflicts in curriculum theory: Challenging hegemonic epistemologies*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Paraskeva, J. M. (2015). *Towards a just curriculum theory: The epistemicide*. Routledge.
- Paraskeva, J. M. (Ed.). (2017). *Towards a just curriculum theory: The epistemicide* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315146904>
- Paraskeva, J. M. (2020). *Curriculum and the generation of utopia: Interrogating the current state of critical curriculum theory*. Routledge.
- Pinar, W. F. (2021). Curriculum and the Covid-19 crisis. *Prospects*, 51(1–3), 299–311. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-021-09560-y>
- Popa, N. (2022). Operationalizing historical consciousness: A review and synthesis of the literature on meaning making in historical learning. *Review of Educational Research*, 92(2), 171–208. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543211052333>
- Popkewitz, T. (2012). Curriculum history, schooling and the history of the present. *History of Education*, 40(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760X.2010.507222>
- Priestley, M., & Philippou, S. (2018). Curriculum making as social practice: Complex webs of enactment. *The Curriculum Journal*, 29(2), 151–158. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585176.2018.1451096>
- Santos, B. D. S. (Ed.). (2007). *Another knowledge is possible: Beyond northern epistemologies*. Verso.
- Santos, B.S. de., Nunes, J.A., & Menses, M.P. (2007). Introduction: Opening up the canon of knowledge and recognition of difference. In B. de S. Santos (Eds.), *Another knowledge is possible: Beyond Northern epistemologies* (pp. vii–xii). Verso.
- Yates, L. (2018). Regenerating curriculum inquiry in Australia: Some thoughts on this agenda. *Curriculum Perspectives*, 38(1), 85–87. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41297-017-0039-1>
- Yew, L. (2011). *Alterities in Asia: Reflections on identity and regionalism*. Routledge.

Publisher's note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.