

Transformative Curriculum Praxis for the Public Good: Intersections of Pan-Ethnic Identity, Policy Frameworks & Research Paradigms¹

A Dream Deferred

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?
--Langston Hughes

The most durable way to improve schools is to improve curriculum and instruction and to improve the conditions in which teachers work and children learn . . . --Diane Ravitch, 2010

“Can’t you replace that map of Africa with a globe of the world?” --Advice from one teacher to another.

The 2012 annual meeting theme conveys how urgently we need to promote the “use of research to improve education and serve the public good,” recognizing that knowing “is not enough.” Such recognition does not preclude the possibility, however, that we also need to know *more* with regard to what we know about using research to improve education and how and why we know it. For example, education research knowledge/interventions are produced within policy frameworks that delineate and direct our attention as researchers to certain problems, while other issues are ignored or deemed out of scholarly bounds. Consider the universal policy framework for the protection of “minority” students’ *cultural* rights and identities set forth in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 30, which has important implications for our understanding of “the public good,” states:

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practice his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language. (<http://www2.ochchr.org/english/law/crc/htm>)

¹ This essay is a substantially revised version of a proposal developed with K.L. Buras, Georgia State University.

Accordingly, James Banks (2008) makes this observation about a pertinent problem that arises within the logic of this policy framework—a problem that merits the attention of education researchers and that concerns the use of education research: “A major problem facing nation-states throughout the world is how to recognize and legitimize difference and yet construct an overarching national identity that incorporates the voices, experiences and hopes of the diverse groups that compose it” (p. 129).

Thus, if in multicultural societies, as Banks argues, both cultural democracy and cultural citizenship are needed in this global age, this essay asks: Can this UN Convention serve as a policy framework for education research on transformative curricula that can be used to advance the cultural well-being of students and cultural democracy in our society? From a vantage point within this policy framework, the research problem is to provide curricula and pedagogical strategies that safeguard students’ human right to enjoy their own culture in community with other members of their group. This problem-focus on students’ cultural well-being as a human right may be neglected by researchers working within a policy framework that gives primacy to the “disadvantages associated with how poverty affects children’s ability to learn,” their “dysfunctional families,” or how to teach the nation’s “common cultural heritage” (Ravitch, 2010)—to the exclusion of any consideration at all regarding how representations of students’ cultural heritage in the curriculum (and teacher preparation) might also disadvantage them, affect their academic engagement, opportunities to learn and their development.

In addition, there are continuing disagreements among scholars about curriculum content, as well as among policy makers, teachers and even students who disagree about the curriculum approach and learning conditions that can best improve education—whether for the benefit of “minority” students in particular, as well as in the interest of the public or the common good. It is often assumed that contested school knowledge, visions of education and conceptions of the public good can be resolved by appealing to “valid” scholarship, and these profound disagreements have been mischaracterized as “culture wars” (of the past). But such an ostensible appeal constitutes a failure to recognize or acknowledge possible ideological interests in the very scholarship that is held as a neutral, objective arbiter. A case in point is debates about

“whether Egypt is an African civilization” or not, debates that were strategically deployed to question the scholarly legitimacy of Afro-centric education (Asante, 1998; King, 1995; Dei, 1994).

As a state-board appointed member of California’s Curriculum Commission during the “curriculum wars” of the 1990s, I protested (among other issues) the representation and location of Egypt in the “middle East” in the California History-Social Studies curriculum materials and textbooks that were developed based on this curriculum policy framework. Now, two decades later, in a social studies textbook in-use in Atlanta, Georgia schools Egypt is no longer in the Middle East nor is it in “Africa” (depicted visually as the land below the Sahara). Rather the book’s maps and unit organization situate Egypt in a region that “is on two continents: Africa and Asia”. So Egypt is in the region called “North Africa, Southwest Asia and Central Asia”! (Boehm, et al., 2008, p. 431).

Thus, the “culture wars,” which I described elsewhere as “epistemological panics” (King, 1995) have neither dissipated nor disappeared. Instead contested school knowledge, that academics like ourselves produce in the academy, as well as contested visions of educational purpose, including the role of cultural rights—as human rights—in a democracy, have merely been sublimated and displaced by a seeming consensus that inheres in the now dominant high-stakes testing regime. Diane Ravitch (2010) is right to insist: “. . . if we want to improve education we must first of all have a vision of what good education is” (p. 230). But whose vision will prevail? Neither the Common Core state standards initiative (corestandards.org) nor a voluntary national curriculum that ignore the problem James Banks poses—which is also deeply implicated in Langston Hughes’ “dream deferred”—can address the educational vision the United Nations human rights policy framework represents. In this regard, the scholarly critiques of the Common Core standards initiative and CORE Knowledge (Buras, 2008), including critical commentary developed by the National Black Education Agenda, are instructive (www.blackeducationnow.org/id17.htm).

Is there a role for research in the resolution of the curriculum implications of differing conceptions regarding the importance of students’ group (racial) identity, their identity as individuals and their national identity? I think there is. However, researchers have to know much more about what they do *not* know

about what the curriculum does—knowledge that has been available in the Black Studies intellectual tradition at least as far back as Carter G. Woodson’s (2000) critical exposé on the “mis-education of the Negro” in the 1930s. If that understanding had been widely embraced in the academy, however—among the scholars who produce the knowledge that ends up in student textbooks—the modern Black Studies movement, the Chicano Studies movement and other transformative heritage studies curricula efforts in schools and higher education would not have erupted and endured since the 1960s (Brown, 2007; Harris, 2011; King, 1992). I was among that generation of students whose “demands” spurred the establishment of transformative Black Studies curricula in the 1960s. When I was involved in the curriculum struggles about teaching history-social studies in California, I voted not to adopt textbooks framed by California’s history-social studies curriculum policy framework in which the United States was defined as a “nation of immigrants”—but not because “minority” histories were excluded (Cornbleth & Waugh, 1995; King, 1991, 1995; King & Wynter, 2011). On the contrary, as a teacher on one of the Commission’s textbook evaluation panels observed (in response to my complaints), people of color were literally “jumping off the pages” of these books. My objections were about the flawed conceptualizations, however, in which we were included, for example: Native Americans were the “first immigrants” and African Americans were “forced immigrants” (Hilliard, 1998; Wynter, 1992).

In this essay “transformative curriculum” refers to heritage studies—Black, Mexican American/Chicano/Chicana, Native American studies, etc.—that permit students and teachers to “enjoy” and embrace their cultures, languages and pan-ethnic identities, such as “La Raza” in the case of Mexican Americans, for example, and Diaspora identities among African-descent people. This tradition of intellectual independence and group consciousness in these communities has generated sustained attack, particularly regarding curriculum, which recent events in Tucson, Arizona illustrate. The K-12 Mexican American studies curriculum the state legislature and the school district banned is designed to support Mexican American students’ identity and “Raza” consciousness. Teachers and scholars whose pedagogy and research support this transformative approach have to wonder if we are going to be targeted next.

Scholarly and public discourse identify “minority” students’ embrace of a pan-ethnic identity as a problem, which blocks their academic and social advancement. This popular discourse, which critiques African-centered curriculum as “separatist” and anti-democratic (Buras, 2008; Ginwright, 2004; Merry & New, 2008; Ravitch, 1990), persists as well in Toronto, Canada, where an African-centered public school established in 2008 has garnered both intense criticism and high academic achievement scores. Likewise, Tucson’s Mexican American studies curriculum is charged with being “divisive”. A growing body of research in several disciplines (child development, Black psychology and social work), which is consistent with a human rights/cultural-well being policy framework, but that is not yet widely cited or funded in education research, indicates various ways in which racial identification actually supports students’ academic and social development. This extant scholarship reports positive academic impacts of culturally responsive approaches linked to students’ racial identification (e.g., Atschul et al., 2006; Bowman & Howard, 1985; Chavous et al., 2003; Davis et al., 2006; Hilliard, 2003; Lee, 2005; Lewis et al., 2006; Nasir & Hand, 2005; Oyserman et al., 2001; Smith-Maddox, 1998). An alternative to deficit theorizing about Black education, this research paradigm also extends to African-descent populations in other diaspora contexts such as Canada and the Caribbean (Codjoe, 2006; Herrero, 2006; Hudicourt-Barnes, 2003).

In contrast to the role a number of highly influential foundations are playing to advance policy frameworks and education agendas that effectively undermine culturally-oriented education approaches, the Heinz Endowments commissioned a review of the literature on cultural responsiveness, racial identity and academic success “grounded in the belief that America’s urban schools must employ a child’s culture so that the child might be motivated to learn in the face of significant adversity” (Hanley & Noblit, 2009). What is their conclusion? That culturally responsive pedagogy and positive racial identity can play major roles in promoting academic achievement and resilience. On the other hand, what might be called a hyper-assimilationist mindset within an ostensibly patriotic-national-identity policy framework disparages and discourages students’ pan-ethnic identification with heritage groups beyond the US borders--whether Africanity, *indigeneity*, or “Raza” consciousness are involved (Ravitch, 1990). Notwithstanding the important emphasis on “making the political more pedagogical” and mobilizing “collective outrage and

collective action,” promoting students’ group or racial/ethnic identity is also not a primary task for critical pedagogy. According to Henry Giroux (2012) critical pedagogy is about “transforming knowledge as part of a more expansive struggle for *individual* rights and social justice” (emphasis added). Arizona’s HB 2261 law frames the problem differently; it “prohibits. . .courses or classes that promote the overthrow of the United States Government or promote resentment toward a race or class or people” (Thorne, 2012).

This belief that curriculum that connects students to their heritages necessarily promotes racial resentment has not been the focus of any systematic research of which I am aware but it clearly affects education policy and the problem these policies frame that need research applications. On the other hand, policy attempts to establish more truthful (and valid) curricula have gained little traction in educational practice or among researchers. In the last decade state-level legislation in the US such as Florida’s Statute - 1003.42(h), Title XLVIII of the Education Code, §“Required Instruction,”² as well as the Amistad Commissions established in New Jersey (Department of State, 2002)³, New York (State Department of Education, 2005) and Illinois (2004), illustrate curriculum policies that require the teaching of African American history, particularly African enslavement, in public schools. Florida law emphasizes teaching about the African heritage *before* enslavement (e.g., “the history of African Americans, including the history of African peoples before the political conflicts that led to the development of slavery”). Likewise, a district-level policy in Philadelphia mandated African American history as a high school graduation requirement since the 1970s. However, Rosemary Traoré (2009) observed that Black Studies “intervention” is required because the mandate remains largely unfulfilled: “Many students of African descent still struggle to be reconnected to the rich African traditions from which they originated” (p. 663).

As compared to these faltering policy interventions, the recent controversial policy decision that bans the Mexican American studies program in Tucson high schools is opposed by advocates of the program on the grounds of evidence of positive impacts of this transformative curriculum for Mexican

² http://www.leg.state.fl.us/Statutes/index.cfm/Ch0499/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&Search_String=&URL=1000-1099/1003/Sections/1003.42.html

³ See, for example, the New Jersey Amistad Commission and the American Institute for History Education online interactive textbook: <http://njamistadcurriculum.org/>. It is worth noting that New York’s Commission is “stalled.” See <http://www.bnyee.org/blackhistorynow.htm>. The Illinois Amistad Commission is now defunct.

American students' motivation, learning and educational attainment (Lacey, 2011; McGinnis, 2011). Yet such positive evidence is generally not widely known or cited. In Brazil, on the other hand, the Black Movement has succeeded in securing a national policy making the teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian culture and heritage a requirement at every level of the education system (Gonçalves e Silva, 2005; King et al., 2011).

In the US the fear that transformative curricula that permit students to “enjoy” their cultural heritage and develop group-based racial identities will inevitably produce racial resentment and rage may reflect the impending minority status of white Americans (Wise, 2012) but is also not to be dismissed out-of-hand. My research team and I are also engaging parents in collaborative research on culturally authentic assessments to identify their standards regarding what (and how) their students should be learning about their heritage. As we discussed the fifth-grade historical novel, *Nightjohn* (Paulsen, 1995), which deals with issues like a 12 year-old girl waiting to be sent to the “slave-breeding shack,” one parent commented that she feels “enraged all over again” any time she watches films like “Roots”. However, she also talked about the importance of taking her children on civil rights marches so they can appreciate the sacrifices their ancestors made for them.

What is needed is serious investigation of the healing potential of transformative curriculum interventions, as Traoré (2009) documented in her research in the Philadelphia public schools: tensions between African American and African immigrant students dissipated when they learned together about their shared heritage. This curriculum praxis has potential to be used to address inter-group and intra-group relations among Asian, Black (African American, African, Caribbean), Native American and Latino/a students. How would Black students (US-born and from Caribbean nations) treat Haitian immigrant students (who are called names like HBO -“Haitian Body Odor”), if they knew the real story of the Haitian revolution (King, 2011)? How would African American and Mexican American students relate to each other if they knew the larger story of the African presence in Mexico (not only that the Aztecs committed “human sacrifice” and Africans “sold their own brothers and sisters into slavery”)? How would white students appreciate their own anti-racist heritage if they knew more about John Brown’s collaboration with

free African Americans (DuBois, 1909/2001; King, 1992, 2006). How would all students understand humanity's debt to Africa if African American history did not begin with this truncated representation of slavery but with Africa's gifts to world?

Such questions suggest an important role for Black Studies in the preparation of educators at all levels and education researchers, who need to be able to critically assess the policy frameworks within which we produce our research, that is, what counts as improvements for teaching and learning and what serves the public good. The transformative research and action agenda that AERA's Commission on Research in Black Education (CORIBE) formulated is a useful resource for this task. It also accords with the human rights /cultural well-being policy framework presented in this essay. AERA endorsed the CORIBE agenda in 2001 and published it in its landmark *Black Education* (King, 2005) volume. CORIBE recommended:

“Public policy development informed by international comparative research that enhances the education, survival, and advancement of African descent peoples. This includes:

- Assessing the impact of African language, culture and heritage study in motivating student effort and engagement as well as teacher knowledge and development in various African and Diaspora contexts.
- Examining and supporting ways people of African descent resist domination and societal exclusion.
- Investigating the extent to which scholars of African descent who embrace a cultural orientation and resistance in their work experience role strain and scholarly alienation, and promoting research that addresses ways to alleviate this problem.” (King, 2005, p. 355)

This recommendation remains especially timely given recent rancorous public and scholarly discourse supporting policy frameworks that contest or ignore students' *human* right to education for cultural well-being (King, 2008; 2010, 2011). Discussing each of the elements of this recommendation is beyond the scope of this essay, but one example will suffice to illustrate its relevance to the annual meeting theme.

For the past two years, a team of my doctoral students at Georgia State University (and one community teacher) and I have been developing and implementing an after-school program for Black middle-school students called the Songhoy Club. The program doubles as both supplemental academic instruction and a pedagogy lab for pan-ethnic (African) identity and consciousness, or diaspora literacy, using a cultural well-being research paradigm (King, 1992). This transformative curriculum and pedagogical approach was first developed as a CORIBE Demonstration Research Project in 2000 that produced multi-media online Songhoy language lessons. It is important to note that students learn about the Songhoy Empire, which encompassed ten modern African nations, as a cosmopolitan civilization, one in which many ethnic groups shared a common language and heritage. The *UNESCO General History of Africa* reports that the administrative structure of the empire included a ministry of White Foreigners and Minorities—the *Korei Farma* (Cissoko, 1984, p. 198; Maiga, 2010, p. 143). The Songhoy Club is implementing a powerful feature of Songhoy language that Malian education researcher, Hassimi Maiga, and I discovered some years ago: Songhoy-senni (the language) illustrates extraordinarily positive meanings of blackness in (African) Songhoy culture (Maiga, 2003/1996, 2005) that are enormously healing with regard to the wounds of white supremacy racism that are deeply embedded in our language and culture. Contrary to the way conceptual blackness (e.g., “black sheep,” “black lie,” etc.) functions as the “alter ego” (Wynter, 2006) of conceptual whiteness (“little white lie”) in our consciousness, in the Songhoy language, blackness is extremely positive (*Wayne-bibbi*: Black sun; *Hari-bibbi*: Black water, etc.). An interactive multi-media lesson on the CORIBE website demonstrates this liberating cultural phenomenon (see www.coribe.org)⁴. When students experience the deep understanding of the African worldview that is part of their heritage through Songhoy language and culture study, they begin to feel relieved of the “burden” of “blackness” as it has been distorted in this society. As one student, who was a real “challenge,” wrote in the Songhoy Club collective book: “The few weeks I was in Songhoy I learned to respect others, respect myself and to give off positive energy.”

⁴ On the CORIBE website, see Demonstration Research Projects: “The People Who Could Fly”—Lessons.

This is an innovative use of research on heritage language and heritage knowledge for African descent students (King, 2006). The implications for Black education throughout the diaspora (Canada, the Caribbean, the UK as well as Latin America) deserve further study. However, predominate conceptualizations of “what is wrong” with Black students (everywhere) within deficit policy frameworks do not fit this pan-ethnic identity diaspora studies research paradigm (Drake, 1982). Fortunately, the Songhoy Club is able to use the innovative Songhoy lessons that CORIBE developed and that AERA has maintained on its web server. The Songhoy Club is also using new interactive iPad learning tools that incorporate original research on Songhoy language and culture (Maiga, 2010) as curriculum resources (e.g., a game based on Songhoy writing ideograms used before the Arab or European presence in the area.) The Songhoy Club is also a site for youth-led research focused on African American heritage knowledge, which they will incorporate into supplemental digital curriculum materials that teachers and parents can access online. This application of transformative Black Studies curriculum and pedagogical praxis offers new possibilities for knowledge production and uses of research that are responsive to connections that researchers have established between academic achievement and identity (Wakefield & Hudley, 2007) and forms of mis-education African descent people share (King, 2005). As a research training site for doctoral students, the Songhoy Club also provides an antidote to “scholarly alienation” in the academy, which we are also documenting.

Scholars (and teachers) who equate “equality” with assimilation and “color-blindness” dismiss the idea that Black (and Latino/a) students can benefit from such educational experiences that connect them with their African heritage and identity. In fact there are a number of intersections among diverse students that can be explored in transformative curriculum research (Anae, 2006; Cuevas, 2004; Horne, 2006). Nor do those holding this view, including some Black teachers, understand how US society might benefit from Black people’s development along these lines (Semmes, 1981). A teacher in an “urban education” program dismissed a presentation I made on the subject this way: “Why should I talk to my Black students about their African heritage when some of them don’t even know who their daddies are?” One reason is that research and practice show positive benefits of such identity development for Black student achievement

(Glenn, 2003; King, 2005). The way Africa and the Black experience and culture are normally taught, however, institutionalizes a dangerously incomplete conception of what it means to be African and what it means to be human, which obstructs Black students' opportunities to identify with their heritage. Others are denied opportunities to grasp fully the implications of the degradation of blackness for society and their own well-being. The white, Latino/a, Asian, Native American and immigrant teachers and school leaders in my classes at Georgia State University also learn to appreciate the deep wounds in their own identities and consciousness caused by the fictions of white supremacy racism (Asante, 2009; Jensen, 2005),

In nations with a shared history of African enslavement as well as different, though arguably similar, legacies of anti-black racism, people of African descent globally and the researchers who intend to produce useful knowledge to improve education need not only policy frameworks for educational equity and national unity but also truthful curriculum and culturally competent teachers in order to develop forms of identity and consciousness to overcome centuries of racial injustice. This essay is a reminder that AERA's landmark *Black Education* volume, which embodies the UN human rights convention's conception of education and cultural well-being, is a resource that can serve broadly to advance such a policy framework to promote more culturally democratic research and curriculum praxis nationally and internationally.

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