

# *Big Ideas and Dissipative Effects*

*PETER HLEBOWITSH*

*University of Alabama*

I'm grateful to be asked to respond to Professor Ng-A-Fook's essay. I very much appreciated the walk through the Canadian landscape of curriculum studies - through the big woods with the big ideas and the verdant meadows of hope, breathing in the cool air that resides at the highest altitudes of theory, and experiencing the blood rush from the climb. Canadian curriculum studies, it should be said, is an eye-catching landscape – vibrant, colorful, and embracing. The scholarly community has sizable ideas, with strong impulses to do good, and with a finely-honed sensitivity to difference and high principles. It is full of theoretical life, brimming with practitioners who are textual and ideational – skilled at posing ideas as the main instruments for making a better world. They dream, ponder and write in a grandiose and ideological language. The theory cup runneth over.

But big language doesn't necessarily translate into big realities. The problem, which is starkly evident in the essay, is that the curriculum

studies field still has a way to go in terms of making any difference in the lives of people. It falls into the traditional intellectual trap of showing more interest in ideas than in people (Hlebowitsh, 2012). And in some ways, this is understandable. Intellectuals have a duty to the theoretical and to the corpus of the literature in their discipline. They are bred to deal with abstractions and are almost compelled to be more interested in ideas than in virtually anything else. But the desire to look at ideas without looking with equal conviction to people is a disastrous mistake for a field that is at least historically situated in the life of the school. The curriculum studies literature, despite its declamatory efforts to engage good social causes, is really bereft on any discernable effect in the lives of school children, school teachers, school principals, parents and community members – at least in any meaningful aggregate (Connelly, 2010). The people at the front lines of the society's key educative agencies are obscurities in the curriculum literature and finding the location of the normative in the literature, except as it might manifest imperially, is next to hopeless. Unfortunately, these seem to be effects systemic to the nature of modern day scholarship in curriculum studies.

Furthermore, the theoretic lines represented by Ng-a-Fook's essay are themselves are so multiple and vast that the very idea of disciplinarity is thrown into question (Hlebowitsh, 2010). As matters stand today, it is difficult to see how we can usefully label anything as a matter belonging to curriculum professors or to the field of curriculums studies. It is not only a matter of anything goes; it is proudly a matter of anything goes. Under these conditions, what becomes worthy of Professor Ng-A-Fook's

attention is some special selection of work, uncircumscribed by anything like a disciplinary screen or mandate. Hence, the snapshot taken here is a personal one and carries little obligation beyond the individual taking it. The fact that Michael Connelly's work does not appear in the references (although he makes an appearance in the narrative) underscores the free spin taken at the curriculum wheel. Connelly's absence is especially puzzling given the fact that he edited a comprehensive handbook for the field (Connelly, 2007) and has otherwise been an active voice speaking to the issue of the field's epistemological state.

When Professor Ng-A-Fook pursues a convergence not just on the idea of curriculum studies, but on Canadian curriculum studies, he lands on the doorstep of a place that values "crazy ideas," that honors conversation, that lives without consensus and that happily aims to complicate and even contest the very idea of curriculum. Conversation and contemplation are at the center of the work, so much so that Ng-A-Fook encapsulated his piece by referring to the work of Canadian curriculum scholars as a "complicated conversation." Conversation seems to be the field's main achievement. Schwab (1983), of course, reminded us that a field dedicated to talking about itself is pursuing an impoverished line of inquiry. And I think that it is fair to say that in North America talking about curriculum work and offering ideational perspectives (mostly on a range of life matters) is about the only kind of curriculum work that curriculum scholars do or even understand. The work is largely about text and talk. This is a long (re-conceptualized) leap from the historic progressive perspective embodied in, say, Eisner's

work, who sided with William Reid in believing that “curriculum problems deal with ways to act rather than ways to know,” (Eisner, 1981, p. 189) or in Schwab’s work who reminded us that “curriculum is brought to bear, not on ideal or abstract representations, but on the real thing, on the concrete case, in all of its completedness and with all of its differences from all other concrete cases” (1978, p. 309).

The absence of curriculum as institution, to use Reid’s (2006) descriptor, is also conspicuous here. Any discussion related to research done in the interests of planning, coursework development, standard setting, evaluative design, test development, lesson planning, teacher development, subject matter organization, behavioral management, differentiated instructional interventions, and school/community engagement is in short supply. The community is quiet on critical school-based issues. Low-minded operational views of curriculum development work that have commandeered the school experiences for millions of children in North America, including so called scientifically-certified teaching interventions that fail to account for situational factors (also known as best practices) or teaching to the test traditions that equate a school education with test preparation, or so called value-added measures that use student achievement scores as dependent variables for teaching quality are curriculum matters that are doing harm to school children but not finding their way into the consciousness of curriculum scholars. Economists, psychometricians, school entrepreneurs, and legislators have more to say on these matters than curriculum studies scholars. The curriculum studies community does very little work that

speaks to Schwab's five commonplaces (teachers, learners, subject matter, milieus and curriculum making). Yet these are the main sources for the deliberative process of curriculum work – work that is done with people, not just discussed at conferences.

And the essay, at least to me, has a bit of a celebratory flavor to it, offering a cheery narrative that shows how the curriculum community has “theorized, developed and mobilized research that engages recursive and refractive processes...” how it “fostered inclusive conversations that enable communities to gather...” and how it has paid attention to its past and still worked to re-conceptualize an understanding of curriculum. I realize that some references are made to criticisms but they are not amplified into any meaningful and tend to reside in footnotes. What is clear is that the field's lack of engagement with schools, its general lack of agency in the life of teachers, student, or families, its fundamental disciplinary incoherence and its disconnection to its historic work are not raised as key concerns.

The curriculum studies community has certainly helped to proliferate what it examines and how it gets examined and it has certainly helped to place a greater appreciation on various pluralities (Malewski, 2010). The curiosity is why the demands of the normative have escaped its good and wide grasp. Why is the idea of curriculum as institution so seemingly radioactive, especially when the community often touts a fully-formed diversity of expression? One answer, I believe, has to do with the field's *a priori* re-conceptualist commitments, which prize a divergency of expression more than a diversity of expression

(Hlebowitsh 2010). The founding of the reconceptualization put it on a straight and narrow path to neutralize or otherwise palliate any form of curriculum work that could be construed as traditional and institutional. This was a matter of unleashing a new expression of insight that diverged from the so called curriculum development tradition. Such a divergence is still very much at work.

To me, curriculum studies has proliferated into a broad field that now resembles something like critical cultural studies. The work is still evolving and still proliferating. Good scholars like Professor Ng-A-Fook and others cited in his essay have enriched our ways of understanding. I respect their work. But we should recognize that curriculum studies is now afloat on a vast sea of difference, rolling on a tide of uncertainty, miles away from its historic moorings, tempting the shores of obscurity.

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