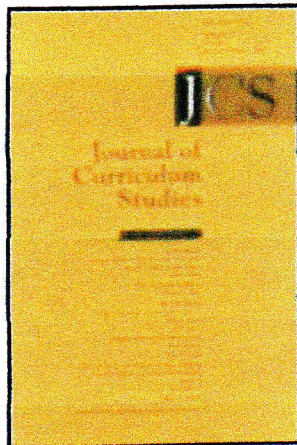


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Race to the top and leave the children behind

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EDITORIAL

The end of schooling as we know it?

About a year ago, the *Journal of Curriculum Studies* received a contribution written by Daniel Tanner, one of the most experienced and respected scholars in the field of curriculum studies and a long-time friend of the Journal. It turned out to be an angry account of the impact of the 'No Child Left Behind' policies and their successor, the so-called 'Race to the Top' programme. There is plenty of evidence to support Tanner's view: many prominent US scholars have come forward in recent years denouncing the 'Collateral Damage' (Berliner and Nichols 2007) of these policies or bemoaning 'The Death and Life of the Great American School System' (Ravitch 2011). According to such critics, the question seems to be whether such policies can lead to the end of schooling as we know it, destroying the possibility of a public school as a common good for all people.

In spite of comprehensive scholarly and other criticism, there is no sign that the present US administration will leave NCLB or the 'Race to the Top' behind. Moreover, NCLB is one of the biggest export hits in the history of modern schooling. Similar systems have been introduced in most countries in the world within the last decade or so. The drive towards such policies is still very much alive: recently, the school board president of the city of my university (Vienna, Austria) announced the introduction of high-stake testing into the capital's school system as a response to devastating results in a national mathematics test of fourth and eighth graders where the city came in at the very bottom of every league table. Of course, many local educators have pointed to the fact that such strategies have never had a track record of sustainable success anywhere. But, most probably, this will not dissuade the city government, as similar arguments have not been able to stop the influx of NCLB policies elsewhere. How can a policy, that claims to be evidence-based, be gaining more and more international traction in spite of so much evidence-based opposition?

It is not only that the critics are not heard: in many places, former professorates and departments of curriculum studies are turned into franchises of exactly the same kind of empirical research and development, which is grounding the current data-driven approach to accountability and schooling. Indeed, one sometimes wonders, whether it is the field of curriculum studies itself, which is being left behind by the seemingly unstoppable success of the high-stakes and standardization community.

Of course, one can ask if the seemingly devastating impact of such accountability policies on public schooling is just a US phenomenon, due

to bad policies or failed implementation. Is there any chance that other ways of using accountability measures and high-stake testing might lead to different results? Or could it be that these policies are held accountable for developments which they just made visible, but did not create? In this case, they should be praised for opening the public's eyes to the shortcomings of current schooling. This at least is the way the OECD, the economic think tank of the western world, and many scholars, not the least from the field of economics, seem to see it (cf. e.g. Hanushek and Woessmann 2011). Or could it be that these policies are not especially designed for schooling, but are rather implications of a wider change in society, and their success and failure as policies thus are not dependent on the impact they may or may not have specifically on schooling (cf. Hopmann 2008)? Or could it be that what seems to be 'collateral damage' is nothing else than the implicit agenda of a 'school syndrome' (Labaree 2012), serving special interests in divided societies, where the common ground left for public schooling is fiercely contested?

As scholars, we should pursue such questions with an open mind. It would not be enough to collect in binary mode evidence for and against the current use of accountability policies. Rather, we should address the more fundamental questions of how such developments come about, the diverse impacts they may or may not have on schooling, and the room to move that is available for all involved from students, teachers and parents at the local level to the national and international policy shapers. Moreover, the impact on curriculum, the whole inner working of schooling, does not yet seem to be fully understood. Does a testing environment necessarily limit the options for good teaching and learning? To what degree are specific groups, e.g. special needs students or high achievers, hit or supported by such strategies? Are not just policies, but also the patterns of enactment and impact globalized, or are there significant differences in how those involved respond to the challenge? Or turning to ourselves: in which ways have curriculum practitioners and curriculum scholars been proactive, complicit in, or in opposition to such policies? Do we have any ideas on how to (re-)establish public schooling as a common good of democratic societies? What could we learn from the history or the present state of the field about such change processes, and the conditions and constraints of those involved?

Many such questions have been discussed and reviewed in public as well as in scholarly research in recent years. The *Journal of Curriculum Studies* seeks to be a place where the results of these efforts, as well as new approaches, can be compared and debated internationally, as well as in a cross-disciplinary manner. As a first step towards focusing on such issues, we have used Daniel Tanner's contribution as an invitation to distinguished curriculum scholars to come up with their views: do Tanner's concerns resound in their specific environment? Which kind of challenges and issues do they see coming up? This issue contains seven of the replies we received. In line with the character of the Journal, they come from five continents and from rather different scholarly perspectives, providing different ways of seeing and framing the issues. But all of them share the unease expressed by Daniel Tanner that we may be facing a very

fundamental transition in the development of public schooling and the curriculum.

As most of us seem to be facing similar challenges due to the globalized impact of NCLB and 'Race to the Top' policies, we should share our knowledge and dare to come up with new theoretical, empirical and comparative insights. From my perspective, offering rigorous research and inspiring answers to the future of public schooling is also paramount for the impact and the future of curriculum studies as a scholarly endeavour. We need no less than a complete overhaul of the field, so that it can become empirically richer, theoretically more rigorous and innovative and practically more significant. From this perspective, future issues of the *Journal of Curriculum Studies* will zero in on the state of curriculum studies, curriculum development and curriculum enactment in its many shapes and places, and we invite our readers and colleagues to share with us their answers to the question: is this the end of schooling as we know it?

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