

# On the Possibility of a Non Narcissistic Autobiography in the Theory of Curriculum by William Pinar

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William Pinar's book "What is curriculum theory?", originally published in 2004 by Hardcover Edition. Although the modified work has been reprinted in the second half of 2011 by Routledge, this review refers to the original translated into Portuguese and published by Porto Editora. On the first page of the preface two sentences set the tone and the actuality of a research from a decade ago:

- 1) Having lost control of the curriculum, public school teachers found themselves reduced to domestic workers, instructed by politicians to clean up the "mess" left by politics, culture and history.
- 2) Also, "empirical" research demonstrates that teachers who were spared from education course work are more successful (than those not spared) in bringing up the scores on their students exams.

The relationship, or rather the fraying of the relationship between teaching and culture in gerund sense, and the political and historical consequences that this entails, set the tone and direction of the debate proposed by William Pinar.

The teacher and his/her training are the central themes of the whole work. The research about what is a theory of curriculum and the demarcation of its importance is made to and from teachers' training. It is for the "prospective and practicing" teacher that Pinar's voice addresses. Merging reporting, reflection, questioning and autobiography the author confronts his own intellectual trajectory and contemporary educational policies. The obsession with gross income, typical of the "bargaining model", obtained on standardized tests, reveals the "nightmare that is the present."

It is in the midst of this debate that the curriculum reform of the '60s came up in the U.S., exacerbating the boundaries between the self and the other, spreading stigmas of all sorts, including that which classifies American public school as "effeminate and black." "School reform", to Pinar, is no more than the materialization of generalism and racism subsumed in the Cold War. Although the book is based on American public school, the issues addressed escape their boundaries, which makes its reading important to the field of curriculum in the broadest sense. The book makes us realize, although this is not the



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author's goal, that the problems of American public education, in its own way, coincide with Western public education; namely, the notion of teaching understood as a merely multiplier action aimed to meet the numerical results that define the political agendas of investment, which for Pinar, ultimately dismisses education of its most basic commitments to promote subjectivities.

Although a "comprehensive analysis of Curriculum Studies" is not the intention, the author thoroughly explores a Theory of Curriculum ranging from the "interdisciplinary study of educational experience" to "criticism of contemporary educational reform", becoming "a fragmented field largely shaped by social and behavioral sciences."

It is based on the reflection on the paths taken by theories and curricular practices that Pinar convene teachers, educators in general, as well as teacher trainers themselves, to the effort of intellectual autobiography, which in his opinion has a revolutionary potential. He says that "we must become 'timeless', living simultaneously in the past, in the present and in the future", and only this effort is able to awaken us from the "nightmare we're living in the present," that is, the loss of control over the curriculum.

The Pinar's position in relation to education is clear: on one side, "Education is an opportunity offered and not services rendered"; on the other, the mere "exchange and acquisition of information is not education"; for him, the "complex conversation that is the curriculum requires interdisciplinary intellectuality, learning and self-reflection." His political horizon is diametrically opposed to negotiating education; for him, the dismantling of teaching profession is closely linked to the actions of the rightwing side of public education, largely influenced by "reactionary whites of deep South" and supported by "misinformed parents."

The problem of teaching, in view of the past, is political; but in view of the future, it is to readjust the autobiography to a screen world, where "new forms of subjectivity and sexuality come up, while the natural world threatens to become virtual". As for the present, it is a proposed mobilization around a "pedagogical commitment," namely, that teachers are no longer only experts of school subjects but rather "private and public intellectuals" comprising self-reflection, intellectuality, interdisciplinarity and scholarship as inseparable. Pinar's goal is to make "uncomprehending colleagues", administrators and parents in education understand that "creativity and individuality" are more important than "competence to take tests."

To Pinar, public education is "political, psychosocial and fundamentally intellectual reconstruction of the self and society", the teacher's role in this reconstruction is crucial since he/she occupies a private and public space, allowing them to associate academic disciplines and cultures of the masses, intellectual development and social commitment, scholarship and everyday knowledge. But for that to be fulfilled it is necessary that the teacher understands this individually and socially, that he and she is able to realize the local and global dimensions of each action, knowing that each of these instances is permeated by one another indiscriminately, and that he and she has a historical and future meaning of what is being professed. The deletion of these assumptions, by public policies or by everyday actions, makes public education generally understood only as a school, a rhetorical and inappropriate construct to inculcate in students 'bourgeois respectability,



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competition, instrumentalization and Eurocentric mono-culturism", aggravating the American obsession with "practical monetary value", making American culture increasingly predatory, saturated with practical energy, separated from ideas.

In this sense, it is with property that cultural studies draw the focus in curriculum theory from the question of "how to teach", which sticks to a "real" previously established knowledge, to shed light on "what is taught", placing into question the very notion of knowledge, its truth and its intentions. This shift also involves the sliding of the notion of curriculum as "substantive" to "verbal action" (*currere*), as a refusal to understand educators as technicians and bureaucrats, but rather as intellectuals who constantly reflect not only on their practice, but mainly on what they teach.

All this makes curriculum theorization a complex and multifaceted field that requires anyone doing it to contextualize itself historically, socially and autobiographically. Life history and self-formation process of theory becomes of paramount importance and are now about knowledge in perspective, interdisciplinary, where the clear outlining of the relationship between curriculum, individual, society and history are essential.

Knowledge thus reconfigures itself in view of the interests of educators, learners and the needs of topical social concerns. Popular culture and academic culture are inseparable from that perspective; however Pinar always indicates that, besides the fact that scholarship broadens horizons, it is the depth of intellectual reflection on the part of all teachers, especially those who are dedicated to training other teachers, which holds out the promise of education: to reconstruct the self and society politically, psychosocially, and especially intellectually.

The notion of training prospective teachers and practitioners presupposes interdisciplinary study that is characterized by the detection of points of intersection between the self and society; local and global; school subjects and everyday life. Moreover, prospective teachers and practitioners must be constituted from the paradox that says that the private self is necessarily public. This paradox is based on Nietzsche's distinction between academic philosophers and true philosophers, where the true philosopher should remain a private thinker, as opposed to those who are at the "uncritical service of the State. The task of the private thinker is to overcome the historical self, to overcome him/herself, to overcome a self-conceived from outside to work it from the inside, reconfiguring the social perspective and, thus, becoming an intervener in the public project. Every teacher should become a private-public intellectual, careful not to become that which he or she speaks, but instead a "talker", autobiographer. The notion of autobiography confronts the notion of school as a business, as a service provision, in preparation for standardized tests of any origin or purpose.

Hence, the current school of **it function as**, which lives in the wake of more immediate political needs, must be replaced by **which reflects on<sup>2</sup>**, more contributory to cultural motives. Illustratively, at the time of the research it was possible to see that the vast majority of American schools still adopted the "factory assembly line model", but here and there began to appear what was then called the "effective school", which adopted the business model. To Pinar, the "models" act both as signifiers of what intelligence they produce and stereotypes of what a teacher is. The models, focusing on the construction of students' intelligence, are intended to constitute productive beings according to a format. The manufacturing model, for example, limits intelligence to problem solving, memorization and calculation; in this case, the teacher is an automaton to occupy a niche in the assembly line. In the business model, which Pinar recognizes as an improvement over the factory one, but not less inappropriate, the teacher is between the manager and the

coach, a generalized metaphor to re-masculinize school; in this system, the teacher-manager, through cooperative and collaborative learning techniques, recognizes intelligence as "multiple in nature and function" and adds "aesthetic, intuitive and sensorial elements.

Interestingly, a supposedly hegemonic school model is not even able to keep the economy as a monolith, nor to prevent other models from imploding it. Pinar makes the judgment that "in order for intelligence to be grown in a fundamental way it has to be liberated from business objectives", which again leads the problem back to the same theme: the need of teacher's autobiography, ie a teacher that is thoughtful, active and influential in the public sphere, on account of his private action.

However, why become an autobiographer and how to do it? It is no longer possible today, and by today, I mean currently indeed, to escape from identity issues. The theme of identity adheres to self-formation and subjectivity in the public sphere, attempting to answer, or at least to understand, the possibilities for public policy to interfere in our minds, our bodies, our speech, our daily lives. The notion of identity here should not be confused with the "I" understood as "bourgeois individual" as some Marxisms advocate, but rather as "the apex of psychosocial and discursive relations, theorized by Lacan, Freud and Foucault." That is why the issue of identity has become so important; stripped of the substantive **self**, it became discursive and psychologically multiple in one, it became the **to be beings**, an identity schizophrenia.

The argument that Pinar uses to justify the need of autobiography is the fact that identities are discursive constructions from outside to inside, as adhesion to what is external to us. Autobiography thus becomes an exercise of production of its own speech, despite and in critical confrontation with constituted discourses. This should be the role of teacher to the author; every teacher should be prospective, practitioner, private and public with regard to the construction of discourses, but this cannot be confused with egocentrism nor with narcissism, it is a public commitment and society, it is a political activism.

To do so, Pinar operates with the *currere method*, Latin formula meaning "walk the path"; consisting of four steps: regression, progression, analysis and synthesis; thus providing a strategy to relate academic knowledge and life history. In the book, Pinar proposes the method to be used, in principle, for teacher educators.

The time of regression, from psychoanalytic techniques, aims at data collection experienced in recent past by free associations, with the intention to extend and transform the memory itself. Such "data experienced" extend beyond the very existence towards local and global stories, seeking the location of the thinking at the time lived. Pinar, to undergo his own method, makes a real archeology of racism and generalism in South American society, back to the moments leading up to the Civil War. An excellent motto for comparison studies in the history of Western education.

The time of progression proposes the imagination of possible futures from the data memory raised, scars exposed. This in no way means the formulation of fantasies and utopias, but attempting to educators write and enroll their "positions outside the 'graceful submission'" to politicians and parents. Hence, Pinar proposes two ways or modes: the stylistic and thematic. In stylistic mode, it refers to the experimentation of writing, style, reminding us that just as literature can produce "effect" in lived experience, the curriculum proposal may take effect on education. In special areas, where topics relating to the future and future expectations are taught, Pinar exercises the possible relationship between sex and technology, understanding the screen as a prosthesis.

Analysis, in turn, lies in the search for subjectivity and freedom spaces, capable of transforming or recreating future propositions in the present. This is a complex conversation with oneself, from the data regression and progression of propositions, which aims to uncover the points that prevent a moment of reflection go to another.

Finally, synthesis, moment of greatest inwardness, aims to investigate the question: "What is the meaning of the present?" making intellect, emotion and behavior a whole in the concreteness of the body. Through complex conversation with himself, in an attitude of continual self understanding, the private intellectual mark is forged in the teacher, who should never separate pedagogical action committed to reconstruction from the public sphere, reconceptualizing the curriculum of objectives in a singular version, in the first person, of culture and history, "personified in the individual concretely existing in society and within a historical period"; in this sense, school subjects constitute or face a mix of academics and human affairs, becoming "the pedagogical practice of the XXI century politics "to connect the subjective to the social and vice versa. Every action has its burdens and its bonus, including silence and abstention.

Commenting on the prospect of George Gusdorf (1980) and his critics, Pinar makes it possible to understand the phenomenological aspect of the proposal. Not in a Husserlian sense, because it is not about eidetic reductions, phenomenology here rather is much closer to an archeology of the self, the Foucauldian mode. A key point that should be made clear is that the autobiographer does not ask "who am I?" But "where do I belong?" along the lines of Robert Graham (1991), critic of Gusdorf; it is not the myth of Narcissus, the desire of oneself, the most appropriate image of autobiography, but of Antaeus seeking his place in the world, it is rather "a matter of place." Unlike the search for an ideal and illusory world, such as in fiction writing, autobiography shows the impossibility of its own dream, a private construction, but in perspective.

The contradictions of the self are well explained in the mirror stage, by Lacan, who reveals the forced image, false, the unified self of the child, a self printed in the child from the outside, subject to the symbolic laws of language. Therefore, according to Benstock (1988), it should be understood "as a metaphor for the vision of harmony of a subject essentially in discord". It is the discord that transfigures the harmonious unity of the self. So, for Lacan, the unconscious is not the depth of the conscious, but the junction line between the inside and the outside and reveals itself as language. Hence, writing, speech, the need for reconstruction, distanced from oneself. In specular subjectivity there is a distancing space where the "self reflected" sutures disintegration and self division, thus forming as a supposed unified and harmonious self, but which is absence, because the suture of separate social fragments is done by that which is lacking in the projected image. To Gusdorf, the autobiography "is the mirror in which the individual reflects his own image". Despite the fact that the self and self-image coincide, the self disagrees with it, through the failure of coincidence, which makes it create new sutures from new absences, without implying compensation, ie, it is possible to create a self-writing that is not cohesive, continuous. Therefore, it is possible to accept the privilege of difference and of discontinuity on equality and identity.

The question of autobiography answers the problem of the speaking subject that can, through language, reveal the unconscious as well as to protect himself from it. Thus, autobiography brings about elements of suture, fragments that met the needs, that exposes the reflected image or, even better, that exposes its fragmentary reflex condition that allows new reconfigurations and, even further, eliminates the possibility of **in itself**. Thus the previously reported warning: the speaking subject must not become that what he speaks.



As a practical example, Pinar brings up Virginia Woolf's reflections on her own writing. Virginia says when re-reading her "old volumes", she makes sure not to do it as a sensor, thus avoiding the possibility of a truth. With that, she discovers meanings of things absolutely placed at random, meanings they had not at that point. Over time, Virginia realizes multiple relationships between mind and writing. Benstock, from that, emphasizes that these relationships imply questioning of narrative conventions, a questioning of symbolic laws, which Pinar infers as masculine. This is an action, a verb, one act at a time in constant reconceptualization which suggests the curriculum as *currere*, where, according to Woolf, "strong emotion must leave its mark."

Another argument practiced by Pinar lies in the fact that "if individuality were not a possibility of development, psychoanalysis would be a subfield of sociology." This argument serves to introduce two questions: first that the autobiography takes place through intense interaction with others; second, that autobiography is necessarily fictitious. The possibility of a "self" relatively authentic, even if fragmentary, is transmuted, in the regressive phase of *currere*, in relief of consciousness that this self is just like the effect of conditioning. Just as in the progressive stage, fantasies about what "could one be" show up by free futurity. To Pinar, "both our past and fantasies of the future are simultaneously 'in' the past and 'in' the future. The self is deeply historical. "

To go through the *currere* way requires effort and courage, each new step has only hope and surprise in the horizon. To become thinking is to launch oneself into the abyss of specular subjectivity, re-suturing oneself at each re-action of alterity and ushering subjective action in the direction of the reflected image of the am/am not. There is no place for Narciso along this trajectory; the image you see in that mirror is not that which is supposed to be its own, but the splinters of the encounter between the inside and the outside.

Thus, individuality does not coincide with the individual, but with the attempt of subjectivity and it is this attempt that should be set up as an educational process - aesthetic - able to intuit the driving force of culture on its own motion, with only the difference in the horizon, able to report identitary policies and not let itself be attached to them.

This thought corroborates the presence, in bibliography, of *Phenomenology of Perception* by Merleau-Ponty, and yet highlights the lack of *Phenomenology and Social Relations* by Alfred Schtuz. While Ponty dedicated himself to timely understanding perception according to *Gestalt* psychology, where, it is true, perception is understood as a field and, therefore, interpretative and fictitious; Schutz dedicated himself to correlates between social interpretation and individual guidance, where subjective exercise consists in trying to put on hold that which, in the world, is apparently given, naturalized. Thus, Schutz's social phenomenology would also be very contributive in the constitution of autobiography, particularly as "self-interpretation of cultural community", where the apparent coherence, clarity and consistency of the knowledge system are deemed as "cultural pattern", aiming to eliminate problematic interpretations that underscore differences, and is placed under suspicion. Habitual thinking becomes suspicious. This phenomenology puts under suspension the usual in order to extend the possibilities of conscious subjective intervention and thus overcome the biography determined by passive acceptance of a story apparently given. It seems to me that Schutz's thinking appears as a good tool for critical engagement with Pinar's autobiography notion.

My only but lies on the idea of method; although *currere* enables a very individual journey, I believe construction and deconstruction are part of intellectual exercise along the

trajectory, of one's own method; however, William Pinar's desire is no other but that this "complex conversation may complicate theirs - and yours".

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Author's bold terms.

## Reference

Pinar, W. F. *What is curriculum theory?*. Adaptation to Portuguese by Ana Paula Barros and Sandra Pinto. Porto, Portugal: Publisher Porto Ltda, 2007. 431 Pages.

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