

Resistance, Creativity, and Innovation in the 21st Century

Transforming Curriculum for Educational Equity

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Introduction

IN THE LAST FIVE DECADES, curriculum theorizing has taken several trajectories for educational change, much of which in actual practice has shifted the focus to validating standardized curriculum and measures. In theory, the standardized curriculum aims at closing the achievement gap among students and promoting equity in educational opportunities across the nation's schools. In practice, this has translated into a race to the top with get-tough policies in schools as part of curriculum change. Between theory and practice is research that evidences in spite of educational reform, the achievement gap has widened and inequities in educational opportunities persist (Apple, 2004). Educational opportunities position curriculum as a regulatory factor in addressing the achievement gap when utilizing standardized curriculum and measures as the parameters for developing a nation. According to policy research, building upon 21st century skills of creativity and innovation in navigating the complexity of an ever changing world will keep the US on the cutting edge of global competition (Adams, 2005). In other words, disrupting convention, thinking outside the box, and envisioning innovative curricula change open possibilities for closing the achievement gap and transforming the educational experience of all students, including those who are considered at-risk for dropping out from high school.

High school is a critical period in the lives of youth aged 15 to 17 years. According to a report by Civic Enterprise (Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison, 2006), the numbers indicate that the silent epidemic of youth dropping out from high school translates into a third of all public high school students. Failing to graduate with their class, one half of all African American, Hispanic, and Native American high school students abandon school within the last two years of completing their high school education. After researching students aged 15-17 years, the report noted that youth drop out of high school for several reasons such as uninteresting curricula, lack of motivation, and one-size fits all standardized curriculum, therefore, these students fall behind

year after year. This study positions educators, curriculum developers and policy makers toward curriculum change for the 21st century using creative epistemologies and innovative methodologies beginning with student reflections, insights, and poems to “help transform how we view these children - not as problems to be solved, but as potential to be fulfilled” (p. 20).

Resisting traditional curricula, a large number of youth who are part of the dropout epidemic have been in conflict with the law during their high school years, and have experienced school suspension, expulsion, and academic failure (Krisberg, 2005; Sharma, 2010). This sequence of events is a recurring reality of the school-to-prison pipeline. The figures put forward by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement Databook, 2006) state that as of 2006, 93,000 youth were in juvenile detention, another 10,000 were held pending adjudication, and 4,100 were in adult prisons or jails for serious crimes, not counting those held in adult detention facilities, half way homes, or awaiting placement in detention. Approximately 250,000 children are prosecuted, sentenced or incarcerated as adults each year, 10,000 children are held in adult jails and prisons awaiting trial, and there is a 50 percent rise in the number of girls being incarcerated each year (Children’s Defense Fund, 2011). This is due to increasing criminalization of social problems that has pushed arrests to almost three quarters of a million resulting in a dramatic rise in detention rates of girls aged 7-21 years who now constitute 30 percent of all juvenile arrests (Akinnusotu, Cortez, Estrada, Henderson, Howard, Kaba, Lewis, Moore, & Schaffner, 2011). With one child suspended from school every 3.5 second, dropping out of school every 20 seconds, and arrested every 32 seconds, the school-to-prison pipeline is an urgent reality that demands immediate attention of educators, curriculum developers, and policy makers (Children’s Defense Fund, 2011).

This article looks at the educational experience of a small group of detention students who are part of this dropout epidemic – girls in the high school-to-prison pipeline. Specifically, this article explores autobiographical poems of girls behind bars who are writing at the intersection of the juvenile justice and the public school system. Curriculum in the classroom positions educational opportunities when girls behind bars revisit the past through memory, voice, and imagination. What resonates is how girls behind bars talk back to exclusion in the name of curriculum disrupting convention to think outside the box, and envision innovative curriculum. Autobiographical poems of girls behind bars articulate unspeakable stories, struggles with childhood trauma, sexual abuse, and school exclusion, challenge marginality, negotiate isolation, and embody resistance. At the same time, girls behind bars write poems of presence enabling voice, historicizing experience, and disrupting curriculum – all of which generate complex understandings of identity, culture and curriculum with transformative possibilities. Writings of girls behind bars constitute a political stance that confront and disrupt forms of silencing and exclusion in the curriculum opening up the forming and processing of curriculum knowledge and practices towards academic equity.

In offering a moment in my detention classroom, evidence and analysis of how girls behind bars shift curriculum from a point of resistance to transforming curriculum, thereby, transforming educational experience is explored. Examples are provided of the crystallization of the processes of learning and the capture of higher order knowledge and skills. First, I give the context and institutional background of education for girls in detention. This study is framed within autobiographical scholarship in education to design a curriculum project aimed at positioning the writing of life stories of girls behind bars as an academic endeavor. Autobiography is interpreted as a complex process to illustrate how girls behind bars respond

creatively with new ideas and skills to subvert school categorizations and labels in relation to their educational opportunities. Finally, I discuss the educational implications of disrupting convention, thinking outside the box, and envisioning radical curricula of students who are different. This article interprets autobiographical poems of girls behind bars as experiential knowledge that disrupts the institutional script of their lives, of life stories that interrogate the inclusions and exclusions woven into school philosophies, policies, and practices to change the way we think about curriculum.

In closing is a call to educators, curriculum developers, activists, reformers, and policymakers for inclusion of all students toward academic equity. Disrupting the connection between schools and detention as part of a complex web of social, cultural, and institutional practices that racialize, gender, and disproportionately impact certain groups of young girls by limiting their academic opportunities is critical to how we envision the future of education (Meiners, 2007). In what follows, I examine the following questions: How do girls behind bars disrupt traditional school curriculum? How do they think outside the box to construct innovative classroom curricula? In interpreting autobiographies, what are the political possibilities for educational equity?

Context and Background

This study is set in a detention facility, the girls in my detention classroom are the research participants, and their autobiographical poems written during my English class form most of the data. The detention facility where I taught, housed young girls aged 7 to 22 years who come in conflict with the law for different reasons. The facility, a private residential detention center with a capacity for 100 students served as a ‘feeder institution’ to the state-run juvenile correctional centers of four Midwest states. The juvenile detention program at this particular facility was a nine-month to three-year placement subject to longer terms depending upon individual cognitive and behavioral outcomes assessed by the detention facility on a weekly basis.

A detention school in the United States specifically for girls is part of a detention facility, a place of temporary care for young girls in custody of the juvenile justice system. Young girls who are in custody of the juvenile justice system for ‘criminal acts’ such as arson, robbery, drug and alcohol abuse, and sex offenses are placed in detention (Chesney- Lind, 2001). Other young girls enter the juvenile justice system for non-criminal offenses such as running away, truancy, not going to school, incorrigibility, promiscuity, prostitution, and behaviors at school deemed out of control. A number of young girls enter the juvenile justice system for being victims of various forms of sexual violence and physical and mental abuse (Krisberg, 2005). An unexpected number of young girls are placed in detention, as they have nowhere else to go. Additionally, families, schools, and law enforcement agencies have the authority to place children and youth in custody of the juvenile justice system (Meiners, 2007).

All detention facilities, including those that are privately owned, are required by the U.S. Department of Justice to abide by the rules and regulations specified by their respective state departments of corrections (Snyder and Sickmund, 2006). In accordance, the explicit goals of the detention facility where I worked were threefold. The first goal was to discipline the behaviors of girls behind bars, the second was to ensure that all the young girls at the facility accomplish the rehabilitation, and the third was to help all young girls at the facility to achieve academic

success. Education programs in most detention classrooms depend on psychological and educational theories focused on the ‘rehabilitative ideal’ for correcting deviant behavior of youth (Blechman and Bopp, 2005). The rationale for the rehabilitative ideal was based on claims from evidence-based research that youth differ from adults and need to be treated differently; their behaviors could be scientifically observed, clinically diagnosed, and effectively treated; and prescriptive plans would address youth offenders’ rehabilitation by altering and modifying undesirable behaviors through a process of normalization (Rhodes, 2001).

As a teacher, I was expected to address specific cognitive defects, learning deficiencies, and behavioral deviancies by teaching girls behind bars how to think, develop decision-making skills, and make normative educational and life choices. Students came to the detention classroom subjected to official labels given them by the public schools they had previously attended, such as special education, reading disabled, dyslexic, academically challenged, slow learners, at-risk, incorrigible, emotionally disturbed, behaviorally challenged, promiscuous, deviant, abnormal, different, and delinquent. Thus, the goal of education behind bars was to retrain behaviorally deviant and cognitively deficit students to conform to the norm. I was also expected to develop a curriculum that would combine the rehabilitative goal with the educational reforms of the No Child Left Behind Act 2001.

Curriculum design and implementation offer representations of education and the value placed on different types of knowledge. But whose knowledge? How was the knowledge of girls behind bars to be represented in this educational environment? Was the educational curriculum offering enough opportunities to capture the complexities embedded in their academic endeavors? Constructing knowledge as an academic endeavor would require 21st century skills where the complex processing of knowledge is facilitated through multiple and innovative techniques, theories, and methods. Constructing curriculum knowledge by disrupting convention, thinking outside the box, and envisioning innovative curricula expands opportunities as the process of knowledge construction is brought to bear upon the curriculum.

Theoretical Framework

A process of knowledge construction for personal, social and educational change William Pinar’s (2000) autobiographic enactment of the embodied “I” in relation to “other” is a process of knowledge construction. As a conceptual framework, the work of the embodied “I” or the autobiographer is to engage in social, cultural, educational difference, disrupt existing power relations and to intervene in oppressive practices that label, categorize, and exclude. Pinar’s framework brings together three interrelated concepts for studying autobiography: the embodied I, the constructed other, and the connection between the self and other as knowledge production or curriculum praxis (Pinar, 2000). According to Pinar, the process of making meaning of experience with others is grounded in the autobiographical telling of the embodied “I” in relation to the raced, classed, gendered, culturally different “other.” By revisiting educational experience, the autobiographer in questioning taken for granted forms of knowledge, unsettles received forms of knowledge to expose the power/ privilege/ knowledge systems of control both in and outside education, and out of the tensions negotiates, collaborates, rewrites, recreates an always-in-the-making lived curriculum validating creative voices and innovative perspectives.

Research Methodology

Autobiographical Theory of Curriculum Inquiry

Pinar's theoretical framework that scaffolds autobiography as a research methodology emphasizes the critical relationship among educators, students and curriculum. Speaking of the autobiographical method for understanding and reconceptualizing curriculum, Pinar (2000, 2004) explains autobiographical inquiry as a four step process consisting of the regressive, progressive, analytical, and the synthetical step. Developed by Pinar in the 1970s, the autobiographical method emphasizes the social, historical, cultural, and political embeddedness of all personal and academic knowledge. The first step in the autobiographical process, the regressive step, involves an inward search of the "I" to confront the history of one's own becoming. For those excluded from the written institutional story and normative forms of knowledge production in the classroom autobiography is a form of retrieval of one's own history - a counterhistory. In the progressive step, self-knowledge gained from introspection brings self-renewal and hope by moving outward to relate to knowledge of others and the world. In practice, the first two steps, regressive and progressive, allow autobiographers to examine educational experience, reveal assumptions and beliefs in and outside the classroom, and develop a deeper understanding of themselves in relation to others (Pinar, 2004). The analytical step engages directly with the practice of understanding curriculum as an ongoing, continuing process. The curricular process then moves onto the synthetical moment - a process of imagining, envisioning, and reconceptualizing curriculum knowledge and practices.

Autobiography is a strategy for studying the relations between academic knowledge and life history with the purpose of self-understanding and social reconstruction (2000). Describing the current 21st century context of standardized curriculum and high stakes testing, "the nightmare that is the present" (2004, p. 13), Pinar advocates an understanding of curriculum processes through lived experience rather than through the development of a robotized or mechanical educational system. Calling for autobiography as a methodology, Pinar (2000) states that understanding curriculum issues is directly related to the lived educational experience of students, scholars and researchers, especially those who are raced, classed, gendered and ethnically diverse or marginalized from mainstream cultural norms of being white, middle class, and heterosexual. Pinar speaks against the othering of those who do not fit the normative definitions in which the other's sense of self and world is undermined, objectified and silenced. Pinar notes that the dominant culture sustains the status quo in education through its grand narrative that excludes autobiographical voices of those who are outside its cultural and social norms.

Practitioners of autobiography ask fundamental questions about the construction of one's identity and that of the 'other,' question assumptions and values that define inclusions and exclusions in the curriculum, and advocate the use of self-reflection as transformative knowledge production. Adding another layer, this qualitative study positions the writing of girls behind bars as valid academic scholarship. Autobiographies of girls behind bars go beyond critiques of what constitutes legitimized curriculum knowledge to position their literary work as academic knowledge.

Participants and Data Collection

In the spring of 2006, I taught an English composition course at the detention facility, to sixteen students in the age group 15-19 years, three days a week in 90-minute blocks. Students

from this course were participants in this study and worked on the autobiography project from the end of May 2006 through November 2009 without interruption. This study is based on data collected in the form of autobiography written by these sixteen students from May 2008 to January 2009. Three sources of data have been used for this research. The first consists of freeform autobiographical writing, guided topics for writing life stories in prose and verse, and personal reflection of participants as follow-up to their autobiographies. The second source of data which informs the study is literature on detention, rehabilitation, and education of young girls in detention. These include statistics on juvenile justice, primary and secondary readings on detention, rehabilitation, and education. A third source of data consists of extensive field notes based on my observations and reflections during the research process and is used to support the analysis.

Each student was given a notebook specifically for writing life stories. Students wrote autobiographies in prose, poetry, and art during the 90-minute block, three days a week for six months. The autobiographies were not to be graded, and students had the right to opt out of the research project without repercussions. I discussed and outlined the autobiographical research project with students. We settled on some basics such as a range of topics, those who wished would share their autobiography with the class, which I would not discuss with others in the school. The assignment consisted of stories, excerpts, narratives, poems, memories, journal entries and art work drawing from students' past histories and educational lived experiences. I kept a journal from the first year of my teaching at the facility and used the journal entries to supplement field notes written as 'the story of the self who has stake, asks the questions and does the interpreting' (Goodall, 2003, p. 60). I kept detailed notes on my interaction with students, the process of autobiographical writing.

According to the state's juvenile justice laws, juvenile offenders cannot give informed consent for any kind of research; hence, the director of the facility discussed the research project with students before giving official consent aligned with Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval guidelines. All data gathered from participants were collected with explicit permission from the detention facility and in full compliance with IRB guidelines. In order to protect personal information of the research participants and the sensitive nature of the data, pseudonyms were used.

Analysis of Amy's Autobiography

The poem below, written by Amy a fifteen year old African American student who dropped out of school two years ago and has been placed in detention for truancy, running away from home, and substance abuse. Amy offers an example of autobiographical writing as a creative literary space where girls behind bars construct their identities, experiences, and memories, through oppositional practices and meaning making within a standardized curriculum. Amy innovates to create a poem that can be read from the last line up so that the end of the poem is at the beginning and the title is at the end of the poem in contrast to the standardized curriculum in detention where Amy's work is considered too creative and remains unacknowledged as work producing academic knowledge. According to her, the reader should be able to read poems from the beginning to the end or from the end to the beginning.

Go Girl, Fly
And
Dream

Write
 Sing
 Fight
 Remember
 Be the light
 Keep the fight
 Life death life
 What they don't teach us
 Pregnancy abortion childbirth
 Bodies kicked beaten bruised abused
 Mothers, daughters, grandmothers, aunts, nieces, girlfriends
 We will not be silent anymore
 I see the froth of lies
 Between your smile and your words
 You look prettier when you tell the truth
 You smile
 You want to hear a different story
 We have other stories
 We live in the past present and future life all for real
 That is our story our history our geography our everything
 Broke girls out of school
 Broke girls in school
 Broke girls out of school
 Broke girls in school
I have a dream

Amy's words are powerful. In form and content, her autobiography is more than literary; it is a political project defining her academic position through disruptive innovation. Amy not only contests the historic gendering of girls that limits their academic opportunities but also offers innovative ways to address this exclusion in the curriculum. Amy has never belonged to the feminist movement, gay rights movements, civil rights movements, however, she continues those struggles against discrimination, racism, classism for a more equitable and just social and academic world. Using creative self-writing to discuss different political positions, meanings, and identities, Amy demonstrates 21st century skills of critical analysis and the processing of higher order thinking skills as evidenced in the form and content of her poem.

Like a historian and cultural theorist, Amy evokes creative and innovative ways to use history, geography, and literature to talk back to patriarchy and the gendering of women's lives that has sought to suppress women's voices, desires, and educational opportunities. In a sense, Amy confronts controversial and taboo discourses of pregnancy and abortion by challenging the hidden curriculum of schooling that "didn't teach us" how to cope with the reality of women's experiences. This delving into memory and talking back is the first (regressive) and second stage (progressive) in Pinarean use of autobiography leading to self-knowledge and ownership of voice. Amy acknowledges the significance of resistance- disrupts by historicizing women's experiences - silenced as a historical presence in the curriculum. This is evident in the way Amy connects the silence of women's history to women's health care and women's rights. She

positions herself and “other” women like her as “I,” “we,” “us,” and “our” as opposed to “you,” “your,” and “they.”

Statistics on girls behind bars show that though education may have been a priority in their lives, many girls behind bars who drop out of school have had to give up their priorities for pregnancy, motherhood, and related family violence - issues that continue to be unaddressed in the curriculum (Fine & McClelland, 2006) and continue to exclude girls like Amy from the school curriculum. For Amy, navigating knowledge in a complex world and writing her story becomes that creative space for raising issues such as pregnancy and violence, child care and parenting, sexism and patriarchy, and their relation to the educational experiences of girls behind bars and their dropout rate. Producing knowledge that demands cultural, social and academic inclusion Amy initiates the intricate process of writing autobiographical poems, the stylization of her lines, the unique structure of her poem written to be read in “re-verse,” demonstrates a highly innovative literary form, a thinking outside the box, that expresses complexity of thought, creativity, and knowledge production. This innovative process of knowledge production using complex literacies is the synthetical stage of curriculum change demonstrating that the creative works of girls behind bars play an integral part in their production and use of academic knowledge and skills.

Analysis of Sasha’s Autobiography

The next poem is written by Sasha, a seventeen year old Caucasian student who has been in and out of detention facilities several times in the last six years. Sasha evokes Pinar’s regressive and progressive steps to contest the way she is represented in educational discourse and school curriculum. Sasha articulates an empowering Pinarean regressive moment to revisit her life, progresses to analyzing and challenging curriculum conventions, and reaffirms her identity in the synthetical moment of using 21st century skills of critical thinking and innovation in the production of academic knowledge. Using her experience as a departure, Sasha speaks about her complex relations with school, curriculum, and education as she discusses special education and calls to mind the political implications for how schools construct student identities in binary terms such as normal and abnormal as well as through labels such as special and mainstream education. Her resistance to school and curriculum is more complex than what appears as disaffection or disconnection from schooling. Sasha’s resistance is contextually bound to the school norms and structures that are being resisted, problematizes school and social norms, and participates in changing curriculum.

White girl in a black crib

Not Langston Hughes, not Maya Angelou,
 Not Gwendolyn Brooks
 But I’m cool, very very cool, don’t go to school
 No more special ed
 No more headaches
 No tears, no fears
 Normal girl in an abnormal world
 Lived in the hood, long as I could
 Livin’ with pimps and peddlers
 Lovin’ the hood
 White girl in a black crib

Why so hard to understand?
 I am who I am
 I love who I am
 Loving myself is not selfish
 It is taking care of who I am
 What's wrong with that?

Disrupting the politics of traditional curriculum, Sasha contests and negotiates her own educational lived experience. She recognizes that lived experience and identity are mediated through alliances, differences, and parallel discourses that are circulated as well as resisted. Reconceptualizing curriculum outside tradition, Sasha's poem highlights Pinar's critique of the standardized curriculum and the process of understanding and implementing it. She challenges the reader to think outside the box by questioning the assumption that white girls do not dwell in black neighborhoods. Her autobiography of place – school, hood, crib, home – is recognition of the ways space and location is important to the process of identity formation with implications for thinking outside the box. Sasha unsettles the received wisdom of traditional curriculum and through her dynamic real world experiences applies her knowledge to use curriculum opportunities for creating, designing, and synthesizing academic knowledge and skills.

Sasha's poem provides evidence of strong literary skills, organization and decision making in her choice of words, and critical thinking in articulating a political message – all evidence of her academic skills as well. The complexity of Sasha's academic endeavor through the use of language remains uncredited in traditional school curriculum. The multifaceted layers of her poem, the content and process of the political message, the decision-making skill of word choices challenges traditional school curriculum and the place of creativity and innovation in current curriculum theorizing and practices.

Analysis of Maria's Autobiography

Maria is a sixteen year old Caucasian born as a "Meth baby" in a small impoverished rural farm community, and dropped out of school in ninth grade. Through contrasting images Maria highlights the deep divide between the imposition of normalization and standardization of school and curriculum processes and her creative and innovative thinking outside the box of a vision for the future of curriculum and schooling.

What if...
 Some girls dream of bringing back their childhood
 Not me
 Some girls dream of having a real father and mother
 Not me
 Some girls want to stay in school
 Not me
 Some girls dream of the future
 That's me
 What if I were free to build a school for all children
 I would not call it school
 I would call it Life
 I would not have classrooms

I would have the whole world
 Life without schools and their bells and classrooms with their walls
 Mine would be called Life for living with Time and Place for Everyone
 And a time and place for letters and numbers but also for noise, color, work, laughter, childhood,
 freedom, love, and hope
 What if China took over America?
 Everything would be made in America
 What if my dream were to come true
 Everyone would be themselves

Maria's poem is both political self-representation and curriculum knowledge production. Her telling of lived experience creates spaces of resistance for transforming curriculum and school discourses that exclude and objectify her. In her narrative, there is an awareness of marginalization and exclusion symbolized in the school bell and the classroom walls. There is no sense of nostalgia for a lost childhood, rather, the act of remembering is a rejection of exclusion suffered in school and society. Maria creates her own idea of school and the world evidencing the opportunities that are lost when we silence or ignore girls who are non-normative and penalize them for not conforming to school's academic and social norms.

Constructing a radical curriculum, Maria uses different narrative and literary strategies as historian of her own past and poet creating her own future outside the framework of a normalized and institutionalized school curriculum. In her refusal to write a straightforward autobiography in prose is a complex retelling and testimony to the variations and innovations for envisioning another form of curriculum. Maria rejects her own marginalization to articulate multiple intersections of lived experience opening creative curriculum spaces for talking back and creating a curriculum imaginary from where a new politics emerges. Thus her autobiographical poem contributes to curriculum critique, literary creativity and curriculum innovation.

Maria's poem disrupts traditional curriculum and its limitations symbolized through school icons such as the school bell and classroom walls. Her use of figurative language serves a counter discursive purpose of speaking about the unthinkable, the unmentionable in normative curriculum and school discourses – how marginality can be used creatively as a place and a space outside the center of school knowledge. In speaking of schools as a place where she does not wish to be, and in envisioning a different school without boundaries that include and exclude, she evokes the connection between schools' zero-tolerance policies that send students to detention suspending their educational opportunities.

Thinking outside the box, Maria envisions her own school where learning would be free from the stranglehold of institutionalization, normalization, and standardization. In schools, there has been an increase in categories of differences used to mark students who do not fall within the norms defined by educational standards and developmental measures making their transition from school suspension to juvenile detention a reality (Newburn and Shiner, 2005). Although curricula interventions are meant to help students to reach higher levels of educational achievement, studies show that such labels that track students have a negative impact on students (Fine and McClelland, 2006). In envisioning a school without walls and bells, Maria is constructing a school outside the process of pathologizing and policing the non-normative through observing, dissecting, classifying, labeling, excluding, normalizing, and correcting. Instead, she innovates a future for schools based on educational opportunities free from academic practices that turn curriculum into mechanics of control and normalization.

Discussion

Findings from this study show that theorizing and documenting the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, and autobiographic poems of girls behind bars offer critical insights into the processing of resistance, thinking outside the box, creativity, and innovation for curriculum transformation through autobiographical writing of life histories and lived educational experiences. The experiences of girls behind bars, speaking and living within complex intersectionalities of marginalizations – social, economic, cultural, and academic – articulate the historical specificity of their lived experiences. At the same time, their articulations intervene in significant ways to disrupt school and curriculum knowledge by thinking outside the box to open possibilities for multiple forms of creative and critical thinking. What girls behind bars give voice to are situated and experiential knowledges that disrupt the notion of girls behind bars as monolithic, homogenous, and cognitively deficit, with political and academic implications.

As educators, curriculum developers, and policy makers, transformation of traditional standardized curriculum and measures is necessary to meet the challenges of the 21st century providing educational opportunities toward equity for all students. Cultural forces such as print, film, music, and digital media as well as social institutions such as schools and prisons represent girls behind bars as cognitively and behaviorally deficient and in monolithic, one dimensional terms. As the autobiographical poems reveal, girls behind bars are capable of powerful resistance to emphasize their thinking and creative skills that underscore the heterogeneity of their lived experiences. Contesting educational representations, whether they are constructed in terms of normal or abnormal, special education or mainstream, girls behind bars reclaim curricula on their own terms, through creative resistance, autobiographical writing, literary expressions, thereby, producing their own kind of disruptive innovation that subverts the standardized norms of traditional schooling. Thus, the process of curriculum change demands the questioning of traditional frameworks of curriculum design and implementation as well as production of multiple epistemologies, methodologies, and theoretical frameworks, to understand the creative ways youth navigate an increasingly complex world.

To ask questions in relation to curriculum developed around technocracy, bureaucracy, standardization, measurement, and methodologies as key to understanding knowledge that gets critiqued or/and validated in curriculum inquiry is significant. It is one where the understandings we have held and the consequences of our subsequent research and practice are unsettled through autobiography. The fundamental beliefs that define curriculum development at various historical junctures make us conscious of the limits of prescribed curriculum frameworks. To think beyond our known scope of what makes knowledge possible and subvert the tendency to silence or erase what does not fall within our own understanding of things is what emergent forms of critical and innovative curriculum inquiry offers. To open educational opportunities for all students, critical curriculum inquiry must envision an inclusive tomorrow. Understanding the realities of curriculum historically as lived experience of self in relation to other posit innovative educational practices that dismantle systems of inequity such as the school-to-prison pipeline, and thinking outside the box to create forms of curriculum knowledges and practices geared toward equity and educational opportunities for all students.

Conclusion

The study highlights the complex knowledge and creative skills of girls behind bars based on their autobiographical work as academically valid. Their autobiographies indicate girls behind bars respond creatively with new ideas and skills to address social and academic marginalization that demand rethinking of how we as educators, curriculum developers, and policy makers understand, organize and implement school and curriculum knowledge and practices. The innovative ways girls behind bars manage complexity and create knowledge challenges us to rethink how we engage with students functioning outside the norms of traditional schooling and standardized curriculum. Their skills and creative processes for navigating knowledge in a complex and changing world indicate we view the creativity and innovation of girls behind bars as strategic knowledge and flows of opportunities, rather than not measuring up to academic standards. The study shows that girls behind bars express perspectives and visions about the future of education, what changes to make, what new skills will be needed in a complex and changing educational world. If the US is to fulfill its global aspirations of being a world leader in education, it will need students with creativity and vision using experiential and social knowledge within an educational system that builds upon diverse skills and capabilities that expand curriculum possibilities and offer educational opportunities for all students.

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