Critical Challenges for Curriculum Futures: Democracy and Education

While the concept of 'challenges' may seem somewhat trite in the context of educational scholarship today, and with no shortage of opinion on what the prime trials are for contemporary curricula, it is notable that we write this introduction in a time of right-wing conservative uprise and live genocide. The educational landscape we face as scholars interested in curriculum is now situated within an era marked by a series of convergences sketching new forms of injustices across multiple social planes. What lies at stake, and cannot be confined to a particular curricular level, is the very concept of democratic life, to borrow from Giroux (2025). Decades of neoliberalism and its evolving formations presents distinct yet interrelated dangers for curriculum, particularly concerning the shift to 'late' (McGimpsey, 2017) and 'authoritarian' (Saidel, 2023) neoliberal epochs – post the 2008 global financial crash – that mark one part of a convergence with the rebirth of a global (neo)fascism. Within this context anti-democratic movements have arisen coalescing under common ressentiments to the – albeit often unaware to these movements – violence and destruction of neoliberal capitalism for all peoples. As pointed out by Mondon and Winter (2020), the result is a broad level of resentment among, for example far-right activists, towards the very concept of liberal democracy and the associated gains pronounced under its post-World war and contemporary political milieu. In reactionary forms these movements adopt, often extreme, ethnonationalist positions centring their dissatisfactions on global minorities, LGBTQ+ communities, public institutions, academics, and more, within a sociopolitical era characterised by powerful right-wing individuals such as Trump and Orban. Furthermore, the notion of culture itself is unfolded as a 'technology' distracting masses from the 'cruel realities of economic stagnation and social inequality' (Giroux, 2025, n.p).

Within this bleak setting, education itself has become a target for the authoritarian neoliberal fascism of today. This is readily visible in Trump's second term as President of the United States, where he has launched vicious assaults on higher education and imposed legislative bans on the teaching of critical topics such as anti-racism and decolonial studies, clearly repressing the fulfilment of democratic

6   curricula. However, this is not confined to the United States and similar occurrences can be seen around Europe, such as in Hungary where a law has been passed banning the teaching of inclusive sex education (Chini, 2024) under a conservative movement led by Viktor Orban. We see in such actions how curriculum, broadly conceived in this editorial, is sensitive to these political forces resulting, in these exemplars, in the repression of official curricular inclusions. However, these are not new insights into the workings of curriculum, where some time ago writing in relation to policy, Stephen Ball situates the multifaceted nature of policy as encompassing multiple interpretations and spanning various material and symbolic strata (Ball, 1993). Curriculum, as a form of policy, therefore, is more than just official text or discourse but encompasses the 'messiness' of curriculum-making as social practice (Priestley & Philippou, 2018) and the manner in which these networked practices enter into power relations. Added to this sociality of curriculum, it also involves a totality of resources amassing scientific, intellectual, linguistic, discursive, textual, and cognitive resources (Luke et al., 2012) across official and unofficial channels. Importantly, drawing from Ball (1993), curricula encompass interventions into practice, thus signalling the importance of a broader network of actors including teachers and parents, and these of course pose problems to be solved in material contexts. Not only does this signal the importance of critical research into the *enactment* of curricula, but highlights the centrality of curricular interpretations and their attended discourses.

This all weaves complex networks or ecologies of curriculum and while it is easy, within liberal democratic contexts, to dismiss the conservative forces as vulgar aberrations and not worthy of scholarly analysis, we need to be mindful of the genuine disenfranchisement of many within the (neo)liberalist worldview (Kitching, 2024). This has implications for how curriculum studies is approached today, especially situated within the encirclement of global educational governance, where all forms of curricular policy are enmeshed within complex power relations (Ball, 2012). Curricula worldwide are often framed within such relations – sometimes exclusively – as servile to economic agendas and the international competitiveness of nation states and resulting in instrumental cultures of performativity, increased accountability, managerialism, and of note to the current anti-democratic turn, the depoliticization of education (Ball, 2000; De Lissovoy, 2015; Delahunty, 2024a; Kirwan & Hall, 2016; Lynch et al., 2012). These malformations of curriculum by neoliberalist forces have been bolstered by global testing regimes which have imputed new technologies of surveillance into education, strengthened further by datafication and governance by numbers (Ball, 2015; Selwyn & Gašević, 2020). However, this does not operate solely on curricula but also on the consequential subjectivities of those actors (students, teachers etc.) both forming and being formed by the coloniality of neoliberal governance (Delahunty, 2024b, 2024c). Precision education governance operates upon curriculum to effect a vision of the future, founded on the potentialities of student subjectivities; tomorrow's democratic polity. Within this global policy assemblage, organisations such as the OECD exert inordinate influence on curriculum-making

operating as a 'master of persuasion' (Bryan et al., 2024, p. 349) and concomitantly strengthened by broader forces such as 'algorithmic futuring' (Kitchin, 2023), global norm setting (Seitzer et al., 2023), the neuro-affective turn (Yliniva et al., 2024), and the ongoing scientism of evidence-based discourses for education (Delahunty, 2024a).

It is therefore essential that the response from the field of curriculum studies reflects a core concern for a democratic (re)turn premised on social justice within public education. Far from relegating debates about the centrality of knowledge to curriculum, as has been problematised (e.g., Priestley & Sinnema, 2014), this necessitates critical reflection upon 'powerful knowledge'. This is 'the official disciplinary curriculum, which is selected from socially and culturally bound knowledge systems' (Riddle et al., 2023, p. 137) and necessitates our reaffirmation of the politicalness of curriculum and its role in democratic efforts, particularly attuned to the disproportionate threat faced by minorities in our present era. As theorised by Paulo Freire, 'solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is in solidary; it is a radical posture' (Freire, 1996, p. 23). Building on this notion of critical pedagogy, this issue stands for an invitation to reorient ourselves to a critical curriculum for (re)turning to democracy and therefore necessitates not only critique of official curricula and discourse, but attention to the textual and discursive interventions on practice, and a willingness to transcend orthodoxies of educational research. The collections of papers in this issue address these various concepts in different ways.

Taking the challenge of critique to task, Donovalová (2025) presents research charting the differences in official curricular representations of gender across several European contexts. This research demonstrates the complexity of curricular interpretations and the ways in which local manifestations of general liberal democratic notions of equality can capture very different conceptualisations of gender; some far more inclusive than others. This not only charts different political contexts and their curricular intentions, but also demonstrates some of the issues with a highly abstracted notion of equality entailed in the liberalist outlook. It must be emphasised that the more ideologically abstract framing of curricular policy, motivated by a more abstracted liberalist (mis)conception, the less the likelihood it will be enacted in meaningful forms in practice. To borrow from Ball (1993) once again, 'it meets other realities' (p. 13).

Dvořák and colleagues (2025) present their reflections on the European Educational Research Association Season School on Curriculum and Annual Conferences in 2024 Nicosia, Cyprus, 23rd–30th August 2024. These research conferences and season school curriculum spaces present opportunity for dialogue, debate and discussion. The curriculum conversations at the events centred around issues such as the drift of curriculum studies towards a broad perspective of cultural studies, which may have resulted in the neglect of practical issues of curriculum design through excessive theorising and politicisation of the field. Reading this paper you are reminded that curriculum text is as Lingard reminds us a (con) text 'a text made up of a range of other texts, related, similar, present, absent, actual, and virtual' (2021). It re-

8   flects what we want to preserve about the past, what we value in the present and our hopes for the future. Dvořák and colleagues remind us that 'a broad consensus in today's post-modern era is impossible. It is not possible to please everyone, but everyone's voice and expertise must be respected' linking back to the topic of this editorial and the need to reaffirm the link between curriculum and the purpose of education and its role in democratic efforts.

The speech given by Lucy Crehan on Policy Forum for Wales conference on curriculum in Spring 2024 is published in this volume. In her speech she reviews a range of recent evidence on curriculum reform, calling for Welsh Government to reconsider the role of knowledge in their new curriculum framework. Crehan (2024) reminds us that what you end up with if you don't deliberately plan a curriculum around progression in knowledge is isolated facts. She goes on to say that to think critically about a topic, or to be creative in a domain, you need to draw on connected webs of knowledge and understanding, which students need to build up over the course of the curriculum. If we are to respond to the critical challenges facing curriculum around democratic education, we need to work together in connected ways around these webs of knowledge. Curriculum provides space for young people to be challenged through critical pedagogy and to be opened up to the world and to the self (Biesta, 2021). Crehan's argument is of relevance to all countries undergoing curriculum revisions such as in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Ireland and undoubtedly in other countries as well.

Lastly, through situating curricular discourses within the rise of anti-liberalist and anti-democratic evolutions, Delahunty and colleagues (2024) sketch the core implications for today's citizenship education landscape. Considering the importance of a responsive democratic turn in curriculum, as a means to counter some of these broader societal concerns, citizenship education is theorised as a critical space to open up to democratic potentials. This contribution highlights these core challenges and presents some thoughts on ways forward for curriculum research.

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