

# Peeling the Orange and Spitting Out the Seeds

## A Metaphorical Introduction to Curriculum

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CURRICULUM IS AN EVOCATIVE and multi-faceted term. It can be what is outright taught in school, while simultaneously being that which is unconsciously disseminated or even “hidden.” Curriculum is more than tangible school purchases, such as a set of textbooks or a new educational technology program. It is passed on at home by parents, who appropriate curriculum from their own life experiences. Even the broad mention of curriculum provokes heated emotions about issues related to race, sexuality, and gender, among others. However, there is so much more.

As a high school teacher and school administrator for two decades, my first experience “getting my curriculum” was being handed a textbook and some worksheets by a colleague before school started. As I developed this curriculum and my career progressed, my district introduced curriculum maps in an attempt to guarantee a uniform learning experience, regardless of who taught a course. I went on to work in districts with rigid requirements, including preapproved reading passages and film clips as part of the approved curriculum, and saw others that, like my early experiences, left teachers to entirely grow their own curriculum over time. Well versed in the high-stakes world of testing and teacher accountability, I grappled with how to express the “so much more” of curriculum when tasked with instructing undergraduate teacher education students. While introducing seminal works of curriculum theory, as well as newer voices in the field, I was reminded that the best lesson demonstrations are often found in the everyday stories and items around us. I looked at a bowl of oranges in my kitchen and knew how to introduce such a ubiquitous topic to these future teachers. Curriculum is framed by society, evaluated and monitored by political and commercial interests, and transmitted through the biases of the teacher to its ultimate destination: the student. As seeds are the most important, yet discarded, part of a fruit, so are students and their own lived experiences (Pinar, 2015) the most important, yet often disregarded, part of curriculum.

Curriculum is composed of many parts. For this conceptual paper, I will draw parallels between an orange and curriculum. The word *orange* is not just the name of a fruit, but it is also a color with many hues. From the vivid hue of traffic cones, the delicate wings of monarch butterflies, or the rusty image of a penny, these depictions constitute variations of orange in the

visible spectrum. As a fruit, oranges are widely consumed for their health benefits. These delicate fruits are susceptible to weather events and invasive diseases and require intensive manual labor for cultivation (Jacobs, 1994; Munch, 2023). When an orange is consumed, there is ostensibly much waste. When people desire an orange, they are seeking the fruit inside. However, all parts of an orange (the rind, the pith, the juice wedges, and the seeds) give the fruit its flavor. Likewise, individual curricular experiences involving teachers, local schools, accountability measures, and greater societal narratives shape every student's education. Curriculum need not be a scary or forbidden word, but a term which encapsulates the systems in which teachers and students work, learn, and grow. Therefore, let us begin to unpeel our mental image of an orange as a metaphor for the many dimensions of curriculum.

### Rind

Wafting from the rind, one can smell the residue of citrus oils. The rind represents the hard, unyielding beliefs, widely held ideologies, accepted societal conceptions, and the narratives surrounding and framing curriculum. These ideologies encompass the fruit of curriculum and intend to protect its quality. The “smell” of societal status quo persists in the cultural and historical narratives passed down by families and teachers to students (Dewey, 1938/2022; Gottesman, 2016), just as the smell of the rind can linger long after it is discarded. Public familiarity with the K-12 school system in the United States causes widespread stakeholder input and involvement, but rarely do people agree on what the essential elements of curriculum are (Kliebard, 2004). The condition of the rind need not dictate the internal condition of the orange. Though curriculum may become damaged in the eyes of some, we are all products of our curricular experiences.

Our world is ripe for a shift in curricular mindsets. With the rapid growth of distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, education for today's youth cannot and should not look the same as it has in the past. In our changing world, pedagogy and curriculum that promoted “mere memorization of verbal statements of facts ... the cloistral activities of the past” (Bobbitt, 1918/2022, p. 11) no longer work. Yet, have we seen this transformation? As we move forward (Apple, 2019; Gottesman, 2016), education needs to be “interrupted and reconceived” (Au et al., 2016, p. 4) to awaken its true emancipatory potential, as if peeling the rind off the past. We must face curricular ghosts by addressing and working to remedy the long-lasting damage done by decades of inequity and silenced histories.

When the curriculum ignores students and communities, a chasm widens between those in positions of power and the “other” (Darder, 2023). Curricular practices that widen this chasm are not productive. Throughout the world, Indigenous peoples have experienced the “sustained assault on their land, resources, and communities” (Marker, 2006, p. 489), leading to enduring colonialist legacies (Freire, 1968/2003). When students from marginalized backgrounds are unable to connect to their curriculum, what does that say about the place of all students in the future? These exclusionary practices continue, as evidenced in recent memory in post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans and Washington D.C. (Buras, 2011), examples of what occurs when local political and business interests make educational decisions. Harmful policies and practices resulted in the “appropriation and commodification of black children, black schools, and black communities for white exploitation and profit” (Buras, 2011, p. 304). Sometimes peeling the rind gets messy, but so does confronting systems of oppression. Addressing issues of inequity in the places where we live and work, including dismantling long-standing systems of racism, is laborious (Anthony-

Stevens et al., 2022). The rind can get under one's fingernails and squirt acidic oils into the eyes. Much work is required before the edible portion of the orange is even reached.

Sometimes rinds are not pleasant to look at; yet, oranges have rinds. Business, money, and competition are central to American culture (Counts, 1932/2022), even when it comes to education. These form the bumps and bruises marking the rind of our curricular orange. Today's curricular leaders must answer questions about what type of skills, knowledge, and experiences students have amassed upon their graduation from the public education system. It is educational neglect to ignore current student demands only to trade them for the anticipated needs of our society in the future (Casey & McCanless, 2018; English, 2010). Curricular leaders must keep an eye on the future while balancing the needs of the present. Administrative hegemony in the public school system often requires a focus on business and economic viability, rather than the socioemotional health of those in the system. Though education has always been connected to personal and societal future economic security (Apple, 1986; Dewey, 1938/2022), ultimately the purpose of curriculum should be to prepare current students to harness "the power of intelligent action to change things for the better" (Kliebard, 2004, p. 21).

### Pith

Below the rind is the bland, pale, flavorless pith. It is the peeled off and discarded point of contact between the rind and the juice wedges. Likewise, data, assessments, and accountability measures are the less popular aspects of education in the view of practitioners. Measuring staff and student achievement keeps a competitive edge for local districts, but this intermediary "pith" between political and commercial hegemony and classroom practitioners creates a barrier between stakeholders with disparate purviews. Some neoliberal attempts at measuring and quantifying curriculum have even been government sponsored, such as Race to the Top (The White House, n.d.). Education does not exist in a vacuum but is directly influenced by broader society. For many, public schools and their associated tenured educators and powerful unions have become vilified (Herlihy et al., 2014). If only teachers would realize the actual power they have by being in direct contact with students, then they would be able to address the symbolic, positional power of the educational corporate world. While hopes for "state legislatures staying out of the business of regulating curriculum and teaching" (Bohan, 2022, p. 15) are unrealistic, educators have not been using their power to push back against the pith encroaching on their flavorful, nutritious world.

The tasteless pith is as characteristically far removed from the juicy fruit of the orange as possible. Accountability measures for the purpose of school rankings and sacrificing mental health for scholastic achievement are detrimental for students and society (Matthews et al., 2015; Rao & Rao, 2021; Richtel, 2022). If an orange's flavor were based on the taste of the pith, no one would eat it. Letting evaluations and data pervade the field of education ruins the true taste and beautiful essence of curriculum. Attempts to maximize efficiency in schools (Casey & McCanless, 2018) without understanding curriculum nor the everyday work of a teacher is akin to a factory owner demanding more production but having no sense of how the machinery operates. Neoliberal attempts at measurement, standardization, and evaluation should continue to be met by teachers and local schools by actions that provide them with "greater control of the curriculum ... greater say in *what* they [teach], *how* they ... teach it, and how and by *whom* their work [is] to be evaluated ... to defend themselves against external encroachments" (Apple, 1986, p. 76). If one just tastes

the pith, they miss the orange. If one reduces curriculum to quantifiable measures of accountability, they miss the students.

State assessment calendars and corporate testing monoliths should not drive curriculum; they are simply part of the pith. However, neoliberal policy dictates the prioritization of test preparation to preserve teachers' careers (Apple, 2019; English, 2010). This practice perpetuates learned powerlessness in which teachers are unable to make decisions based on what best meets their students' needs (Dewey, 1938/2022). The COVID-19 pandemic was a missed opportunity to transform curricular practices. Instead of exploring flexibility in school structures and practices, educators were pigeonholed by fear and manipulation to force the extant systems into an online format, continuing the fact that the daily efforts of teachers, in many districts, are ultimately reduced to a score (Meyer, 2016). Rather than permitting various expressions of creativity in school (Pinar, 2012), successful students must be experts in test-taking,

On the local level, administration, boards of education, and staff can team together positively and powerfully. As we move away from the rind and the pith, we begin to see the dazzling, juice wedges. Likewise, as we move from the harsh world of economic and political hegemony, discriminatory practices, and the tasteless universe of assessment and evaluation, the local stakeholders offer glimmers of hope. They make decisions on tangible curriculum—the supplies, programs, and devices schools purchase, order, and use. They also implement policies and develop district culture. These are the intangible flavors of curriculum. Local stakeholders should be empowered to enact local policies for what makes sense in their specific context. However, these individuals must understand curriculum writ large and that it is not a weapon for cultural wars. During the early pandemic lockdowns, typically rigid educational policies were amended for local control and discretion, making conditions ripe for thriving at the local level. However, with this freedom came uncertainty. Was it more palatable for teachers to be confined to the predictable measures of the pith versus the delicious freedom of local autonomy? As the pandemic continued, increasing requirements burdened educators. How ironic that those within the freeing field of education are the ones most enchained by its very structure.

### Juice Wedges

The local school is represented by the juice wedge. Wedges, also known as carpels, are made of individual juice follicles that are actually single, visible plant cells (Nutritious Movement, 2020). Individual teachers, represented by the unique follicles, are assigned to schools with their colleagues, just as wedges are composed of a number of juice follicles. This is the desirable part of the orange, where the delectable, nutritious fruit is found. Each wedge, like school districts and teachers, has its own distinct flavor and can differ in size, appearance, and taste. Our society, too, has a wide variety of schools and teachers.

Pedagogy drives curriculum and is transmitted through the teacher. The responsibility of protecting curriculum is not limited to students, society, and supplies; it is being mindful of the educator's own inherent biases. Teachers should set the example for their students and be avid lifelong learners themselves. Rather, the misconceptions of the teacher are often passed down to students (Freire, 1972; Monreal & McCorkle, 2021). Teachers need to be soberly mindful of the hegemonic forces operating constantly in and through them in the classroom and not be the "unattached intellectual" (Apple, 2010, p. 172), or one with academic training who does not connect with their current context and students. Montessori (1912/2022) lamented the lack of

scientific training for teachers and hoped to “raise teachers from the inferior intellectual level to which they are limited today” (p. 20). No curriculum can be uniform because no educational experience is uniform; it is flavored by the individual teacher.

The internal state of the educator is one of the most important factors in a classroom. Only when educators are in a healthy physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual state can they give of themselves to the students in a positive, sustainable manner. This is the starting point for a productive conversation on systemic change in K-12 education. Curricular change requires personal retrospection and introspection (Au, 2010). In formal K-12 environments, an electronic device, a politician, or an educational technology company does not know the student like the teacher does. As juice wedges surround the seeds of an orange, the teacher is the package through which the student receives curriculum.

The dynamic relationship between teacher and student is the key ingredient of the curriculum. This relationship is impacted by the surrounding rind and pith, all factors contributing to an increasing number of teachers leaving the field (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Teachers have lost control of the curriculum, their own love of learning, and have become “technicians in service to the state.” (Pinar, 2012, p. 2). For most schools throughout the United States, the structure of the school day, pedagogical practices, and even the curriculum have remained untouched for decades. Administration is frequently removed from the daily “process of production” (Ingersoll, 2003, p. 185) in which teachers’ generate curriculum for their students. This is troubling, for “children are the ends of what education is about in the first place” (English, 2010, p. 123). A high-quality education system that transforms society is flavored by individual educators who know, love, and care for their students. When you eat an orange, the nutrition and pleasant taste is, in actuality, recalling the juice wedge, not the rind or pith. Likewise, formative, positive curricular experiences are brought directly to students through the efforts of teachers and local school systems, not accountability measures or political ideologies.

### Seeds

Once we go through the rind, pith, and juice wedges, we arrive at the seeds. Without seeds, there would be no orange. Without students, there would be no need for curriculum. Their existence is the object of all curricula. Students, like seeds, are gifts for the future, ensuring the forward movement of society. The seeds are situated in the juice wedge as students are surrounded by their schools and teachers but influenced and enacted upon by the whole curriculum or orange. Although seeds are the very reason oranges exist, they are spit out. Likewise, if student learning is the goal of curricular development and reform, why are students’ needs often the last consideration by educational stakeholders?

A child’s education does not begin in school. Moll et al. (1992) remind us that “only a part of that child is present in the classroom” (p. 137). Speaking to the multicultural nature of public schools, social reformer Jane Addams (1910/2022) validated diverse student histories while imagining more equitable future possibilities for neighborhoods, families, and, of course, young students. King et al. (2020) trace the strong lineage of black curriculum, a legacy under attack in some parts of the United States today. “Valuing, learning from, and passing on a much wider array of knowledge than that which resides in traditional bodies of school knowledge only” (Sleeter, 2005, p. 8) is a result of approaching curriculum from an asset-based, multicultural mindset.

Acknowledging challenges the student may face at home and harnessing the power of a sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2016; Yuval-Davis, 2006) and love (Darder, 2023) will validate all students' positions in the schools and connect the curriculum to their lives. Will curricular leaders take the time to nourish the seeds of our students to develop “a culture shared rather than a superior one that hovers” (Leonardo, 2018, p. 17)? Who will dare trade a focus on the rind for care for the seeds? What stakeholder will reject getting caught up in the pith or the juice wedges? Tuck and Yang (2012) make a noteworthy parallel of modern colonialism persisting in dangerous neighborhoods, military recruitment practices, and the so-called “school to prison pipeline” (Heitzeg, 2009), keeping students captive in the very structures supposedly designed to assist them.

Seeds are carefully conserved as they are vital for the future of humanity (Evjen, 2024). Likewise, students hold the future of our society. Seeds cannot flourish without the proper conditions of good soil, sunlight, and water. Children need healthy environments in which to holistically thrive. If any of the conditions are less than ideal, we stunt the growth and potential of our society's future. We need to start listening to what students need and appropriately respond in our curricular decisions on all levels—local juice wedges, tasteless measures of the pithy system, and the powerful, aromatic policies of the rind.

## Conclusion

Curriculum encompasses everything that influences a student's learning. Using the analogy of an orange, the rind or peel represents the firm beliefs, ideologies, and narratives that package curriculum. This protective shell is designed to protect the quality of the fruit within. Sometimes, the tough and protective rind gets damaged. However, it still is an important part of the orange, just as power structures surrounding education impact what happens to the internal pieces of curriculum. The white pith of an orange is reminiscent of the data and evaluation methods so prevalent in education. The pith is tasteless and sometimes perceived as an annoyance. Like excessive testing and measurement, the most common interface schools and teachers have with powerful political structures relates to accountability measures. Next, there are the juice wedges. Composed of individual juice follicles, or teachers, each wedge has its own individual flavor. The juice wedges representing a variety of unique local schools, teachers, and classroom experiences give a distinct flavor to the curriculum. Finally, the seeds of the orange are analogous to the students. Influenced by the whole fruit, the seeds are situated near the wedges, just as students are surrounded by teachers and schools. Seeds are the reason oranges exist; without seeds, there are no oranges. Without students, there is no curriculum.

The different facets of curriculum all work together to form a student's learning experience. The seeds cannot exist in isolation from any other portion of the orange. Seeds seem strange without knowledge of their context within the larger fruit; only in viewing the whole orange can we see the dynamic interplay of all the parts. Similarly, a student cannot flourish without all aspects of curriculum working together to provide optimum conditions for learning.

As educators, it is our responsibility to reflect upon our role in curriculum while considering the metaphor of an orange. First, we must recognize how our own personal development, the institution where we work, and the lives of our colleagues and administrators have been influenced by each part of the orange. Even the types of data we collect and are mandated to report are wrapped up in broader politics and ideologies, just as the rind envelopes an orange. Based on our current personal and professional contexts, we must examine the flavor that

we bring to the wedges of the orange as we embody our positions and institutions. Are there aspects of our jobs where the measures of accountability, the pith, have become too dense, impacting the overall flavor of the orange, for not only others, but even for ourselves? Finally, who are our seeds? Are we, in the contexts and structures within our purview, creating good growing conditions for the seeds of our students to bear fruit?

Curriculum encompasses all the factors that could help empower the student for their future. Knowing curriculum is “more than the lesson plan” (Mensah, 2020, p. 2) fosters a holistic view of our role as educators in overall student development. Will our efforts today produce more fruit in the future? It all depends on how we treat our seeds.

Acknowledgement: The author would like to thank Dr. Sarah A. Robert (University at Buffalo) for her encouragement and support of this article.

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