

# **Ideology, Curriculum & The Self: The psychic rootedness of ideology and resistance in subjectivity**

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## **Abstract**

*One of the guiding questions in this discussion is how is it that certain ideologies become so ingrained and resistant to challenge and scrutiny? The central assumptions sustaining the argument conceive curriculum - the backbone of educational practice- to be an expression of ideological activity; the understanding of ideology as lived experience; and subjectivity as a site of ideology mediated by language.*

*By drawing on curricular and psychoanalytic theory, in this paper I claim that the ideological content gets established through curricular practices not only at the cognitive and conscious level of knowledge and disciplinary subject-matter contents, but rather - and more decisively- at the unconscious level of the construction of subjectivity through psychic processes mediated by language.*

*The paper is an attempt to sketch a preliminary understanding of the processes that result in ideological positionings that challenge scrutiny and contestation, by exploring their rootedness in desire and the psychic formation of the self.*

**Keywords:** ideology, curriculum, unconscious, subjectivity

### **Curriculum as an expression of ideological activity**

That school is an institutionalized apparatus to socialize the younger generations into the mainstream, dominant forms of social life is a familiar and widely accepted notion of the function of schooling (Apple, 1979).

To acknowledge, however, that curriculum and pedagogical practices are a form of power infused with ideological commitments is quite different.

By moving that argument a step further, and proposing that curriculum is a way of modelling and regulating ideological content in the participants of a pedagogical relation, I want to suggest that this process shape, condition and calls into existence a particular subject, through discursive and non-discursive practices. In other words, that what is at stake in curriculum - beyond issues of cultural selections of content- is that it models particular structures of thought that predispose subjects to think, feel and act in a certain way in the social sphere (Murillo, 2014).

Seen this way, educational practice is revealed in its ethical dimension - under what conditions and purposes do we decide and interfere in what another subject will learn or will not learn- but also, and quite importantly, in the ideology of its politics of identity - the very kind of subject we call into existence through pedagogical discourse.

In this context, the ideological effect on the self through pedagogical practice occurs not only at the level of access and use of content knowledge, but more importantly, in the establishment of certain arrangements of relations and conditions of a person's *ser y estar* - the simultaneous and inextricable experience of identity and state of being in the world that defines the contours of our self and agency.

Put differently, pedagogical practice has an effect on people's "know what" as well as "know how", but also - and crucially- in the configuration of the perceived conditions, limits and possibilities for those subjects' "being" and their "becoming".

Following Apple (1979), traditional and mainstream approaches to education cannot illuminate the ideological dimension of curricular practice, nor the ways in which the day-to-day activities of school mediate mechanisms of hegemonic domination. This is so, since the process of subject formation, or "subjection" (Foucault, 1979; Butler 1997), is a manifestation of power that operates beyond the cognitive terms of traditional curricular concerns with content selection and methods of instruction, requiring the examination of the psychic dimension of consciousness and subjectivity. By acknowledging the rootedness of school in social control, and bringing to discussion the relations between the ideological-cultural workings of curriculum and the formation of subjectivity of individuals, Apple raises a question often eschewed, but central in this discussion: How is it that certain ideologies get established and become so resistant to challenge, scrutiny and critique?

Drawing on psychoanalytic criticism (Butler, 1997; Bracher, 1993; Pinar, 2011) this paper attempts to sketch a preliminary understanding of the processes that result in ideological positionings that challenge scrutiny and contestation, by exploring their rootedness in the psychic formation of the self.

In a different but related discussion, Pinar (2008, p. 23) points out that "it is through subjectivity that one experiences history and society". In this sense, if we were to see ideology as the relations established between individuals and their conditions of existence - as Althusser asserted- then we can begin to consider that a decisive element that needs to be examined when studying

ideology is that of the subjective formations of the self, as ideology -and one might say also curriculum - are fundamentally *lived* experiences.

Then, and in admitting the link between ideology and subjectivity, it becomes important to situate first what it is that we refer to when we talk about ideology.

### **Framing ideology**

The task of examining the issue of ideology and its curricular workings in the psychic formation of subjectivity is an ethical as well as an intellectual responsibility. The need to look at the effects of pedagogical practice in relation to the self is also an apparent concern for Apple (1979), when he asserts that “part of the task of curricular scholarship is to bring to a level of awareness the latent results of our work, for values continually work through use and are sedimented within the very mind set we apply to our problems” (p. 108).

Those latent results of our work as educators and the particular values that are embedded and systematized in our educational institutions become constitutive parts of our mindsets, thus, constituting central features of ideology.

The notion of ideology, however, far from being univocal, has proven to be polysemic and a focus of contestation from diverse academic and political perspectives and schools of thought throughout the last century (Freeden, 2003). Amidst the divergence in emphases, for the purposes of this discussion, a productive starting point to qualify ideology is to consider Althusser’s (1970) idea that we, as individuals, *live* in ideology, in a determinate representation of the world, which can be experienced in a variety of representations (religious, ethical, etc.).

By identifying that ideologies are realized and sustained in institutional apparatuses, Althusser explains that ideologies are always related to particular actions, practices and attitudes inscribed within each apparatus. In that context, he further explains, individuals act, behave and adopt certain practical attitudes according to the set of practices that are typical to that set of beliefs to which they choose and adhere to. For example, and to bring the discussion to our context, within the institution of school there are certain practices that one would expect to see and that are typical to that context, that differ from the practices we would find in other contexts, such as pubs or hospitals. In school one expects to find practices like teaching, evaluating or studying, but also particular ways of doing those things that involve how one speaks, how time is used, and even the disposition of the bodies. Within those typical set of practices, however, the adherence of individuals to particular ideas and beliefs have an effect in the way each subject conceives them, giving place to the emergence of different ways of carrying out a certain practice. To give an example, however general and superficial, a teacher with a Vygotskian constructivist view of learning teaches and evaluates differently (one would hope) from a teacher with a cognitive - behaviourist approach.

Would this imply that even those standard, day-to-day practices in schools can be considered to be ideological? If our actions and attitudes are guided by some sort of idea about the world, what is good, desirable, or by any sense of what an “ideal” society would look like or entail, then the answer is yes, as those practices are never neutral or value-free, but rather informed by beliefs, projects and desires that steer conditions of reality towards that ideal, rendering educational human action political and ideological.

Althusser would agree with this perspective, as his conjoint theses in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (1970) powerfully demonstrate:

1. *“There is no practice except by and in ideology”*
2. *“There is no ideology except by the subject and for the subjects”*

In this sense, we can see the intertextual connection with Antonio Gramsci, for whom ideology is a *practice* in the world, a “recurring pattern of (political) thinking for which there is evidence in the world” (Freeden,2004, p.21).

Following Althusser, and his suggestion that ideologies are realized in institutions, in their rituals and their practices, the task of understanding ideology requires paying attention to those material practices that are embodied within institutions such as schools, as evidence of meaning-making practices informed by beliefs and intentionalities. Michael Apple (1979) points out that, within schools, “the principles and rules that are taught will give meaning to student’s situations”...(p.43) and then adds that “questions about meanings in social institutions tend to become questions of control” (p. 46).

The ideological struggle for validation and installation through practices within institutions - like school- become evident. The curricular practices within institutions of formal education cannot escape their ideological nature.

However central the aspect of practice is for the understanding and analysis of ideology, such understanding would be incomplete if we did not take into account the implications that derive from the second of Althusser’s conjoint theses, related to subjectivity. What is the nature of the relationship that is established between ideology and subjectivity?

### **The formation of subjectivity: a haven of ideology**

Investigations into the ideological effects that the institution of school and its practices have on the predisposition of consciousness is not new among critical and progressive intellectuals. Among them, Basil Bernstein, for example,

recognizes a direct relationship between the two by asserting that: “through education the individual’s ‘mental structures’ (categories of thought, language and behaviour) are formed” (as cited by Apple, 1979, p. 32).

More often than not, however, these authors do not explore this relationship in terms of its functioning that would allow for an understanding of how is it that it works, and the elements involved in its efficacy.

In this context, the work of Louis Althusser in his essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (1971) become an important reference, as it provides an insightful theoretical analysis that illuminates that problematic. His central thesis in that essay is brief but strong: “ideology interpellates individuals as subjects”.

If we take into account his conjoint theses referred to above, it is possible to see that here Althusser is granting ideology constitutive power, by establishing a dialectical relationship where ideology constitutes a particular subject, while at the same time, individuals enact ideologies through their practices. The vehicle through which ideology operates is that of interpellation, or calling an individual to assume a certain position as subject.

To illustrate the function of interpellation (or hailing) in simple terms, Althusser uses the imaginary situation where a policeman in a street shouts “Hey, you there!”. The moment the hailed individual stops and turns around, he becomes a subject, as he recognizes that it is him who has been hailed, accepting the terms of the hailing.

Translated to the world of education, the notion of interpellation holds important insights to explicate the way curriculum and pedagogy have operated

as forms of interpellation to - through systematic discourses, practices and the use of institutional authority - produce, name, or bring forth a certain subject (a subject as “student” with certain characteristics that is expected to speak and act in certain ways, a subject “teacher” in programs of teacher education, and so on).

We see examples of this in what I would call formal-institutional curriculum designs in which often times there are explicit declarations of outcomes or characteristics of the type of person they hope to graduate (usually organized and uttered in standards, competencies or broader declarations, such as “reflective practitioner”, “skillful and flexible professional”, etc.). At the same time, there are other more informal or day-to-day practices that although are not prescribed explicitly, they are still part of the practices and discourses of the educational institution. Here we find the interpellation or “naming” of a particular subject in students by the discourse and interactions modelled by teachers and others figures of authority within the school setting. Although not always systematic, the “lived curriculum” of everyday interactions can have a tremendous effect. For example, Viviana Mancovski (2011; 2014) demonstrates through her research how the words and judgements uttered by teachers - as expressions of encouragement, appreciation, anger, scolding and so on- are a form of evaluation that configures important aspects of students’ subjectivities. In the same way, Apple (1979) also offers empirical evidence of how the experience of Kindergarten, with its practices of socialization in the subjection to designated roles, pre-set times for work and play, rewards and punishments, silence and obedience, among others, impacts in the initiation of the young into a particular (capitalist) dimension of the world of work.

In her study on theories of subjection, or the processes that bring about subjectivity, Judith Butler (1997) draws heavily on the Althusserian notion of



interpellation to explore the psychic processes by which power operates in the subjection of individuals, both in the establishment of a particular subjectivity, but also in the spaces of possibility within that process that allows for the expression of desire and the emergence of agency of the self.

When considering that the outcomes or subject positions pre-defined by curriculum designs do not always succeed in establishing their prescriptions on individuals (graduates), a question one might raise is: Have we relied on the function of interpellation for the curricular processes of education, and its research and critique? If so, what are some of the implications of such established, yet precarious approach to the instilling of dispositions in students?

To situate the problem, consider the process of teacher education. Following Butler's reasoning, a possible answer to the discrepancy between the curricular "promises" in programs (such as "reflective practitioner", "community leader", "commitment to social justice", and so on) and the actual practice, beliefs and commitments of their graduates, might be connected to the fact that the curriculum of professional formation has interpellated group categories (reflective practitioners, leaders, etc), but not the individual.

As Butler notices, and Althusser himself recognize, this performative effort of "naming" someone into existence (with certain attributes and attributions) can only really *attempt* to bring its addressee into being. There is always the risk of misrecognition, but also a space for disobedience. One could only strategically appear to be interpellated, or could simply ignore that interpellation, as someone who refuses to stop and turn around when being called upon by the other.

This might help explain why teachers -when encountering a problem in their practice- go back to doing what they saw worked in their previous experience of

schooling instead of what they “learned” in university, as we can notice in Dan Lortie’s (1975) sociological study on schoolteachers.

Another example of the falter of interpellation by “decree” or institutional authority can be found in the curricular reform of the 1990’s in Chile. After several years and millions of dollars spent in numerous compulsory nation-wide programs of professional development to tell teachers how to become “constructivist practitioners”, the conclusion reached at the end of that decade was that “the educational reform did not reach the classroom”. This could be explained- partially- in that the discourse tried to impose, or interpellate, a particular way of being and doing things, “teaching” teachers how to implement this or that new methodology and strategy, but without ever considering what were the beliefs and structures of thought and experience that were already deep-seated in teachers across the system. A lesson to be learned here in terms of curriculum and public policy design, is that promoting change at the level of discourse or practices alone can only scratch the surface of subject’s identifications. More radical and permanent change require dealing with deeper structures that conform the self, and that organize at a micro level the system of beliefs, identifications, wants, needs and, fundamentally, the direction of desire.

### **Ideology and curriculum: at the intersection of desire and self**

Another way of looking at the issue of subject formation, and that help illuminate the function of interpellation in the terms just mentioned, can be found in psychoanalytic theory and criticism.

Two important aspects that psychoanalytic theory can bring to this discussion is its special attention to language and desire in the processes of production and maintenance of the psyche, as well as their material evidence through discourse and the body.

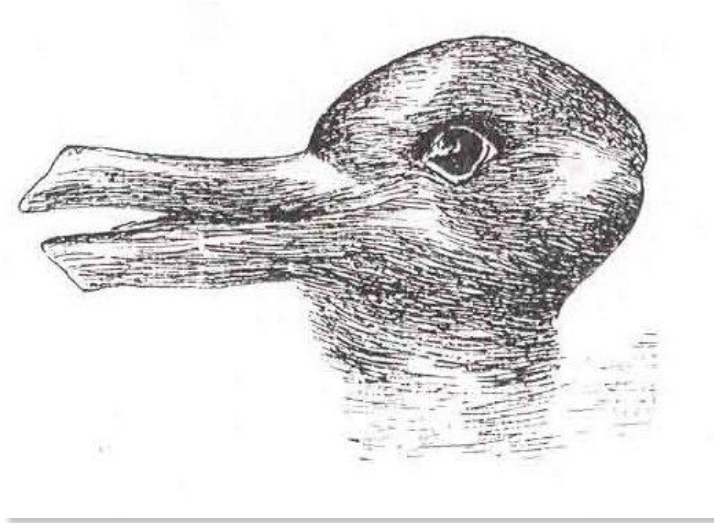
In this respect, Mark Bracher (1993) contends that more cognitive-centered approaches can be misleading in their approach to subject formation, as they ignore “important elements of subjectivity (ideas, values, fantasy, desire, drives and *jouissance*) that are just as essential in determining a subject position as knowledge is” (p.10).

By focusing on desire as one of the main psychoanalytic means to understanding cultural change, as well as resistance to change, Bracher explains that “Insofar as a cultural phenomenon succeeds in interpellating subjects - that is, in summoning them to assume a certain subjective (dis) position- it does so by evoking some form of desire or by promising satisfaction of some desire”. He then adds that “It is thus desire rather than knowledge that must become the focal point...if we are to understand how cultural phenomena move people” (p. 19).

Psychoanalytic theory and criticism, then, offers the potential to understand the processes and relations of subjection at the level of the psyche, by illuminating the roles and effects of linguistic and discursive practices that “move” people and their desires and identifications to feel, perceive and act in a certain way.

As the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy states, for Lacanian psychoanalysis “the most significant and indispensable conditions of possibility for singular subjectivity is the collective symbolic order”. Bringing this insight to education, we see then that two important aspects that account for the formation of subjectivity in individuals are the institutional practices (the collective) and its culture, as well as the use of language (the symbolic).

In this attention to language, let us consider - as a matter of example- the hand drawing of a duck from the 1800s used by Wittgenstein.



After you look at this duck and its features, like the beak, or its neck, consider what happens once you read the word “rabbit”. It is highly possible that after reading the name of a completely different animal, what you see in the image above is quite different. The image has not changed. Your perception of it has.

This change in the meaning-making process that you quite possibly experienced is triggered by a semantic selection that provides a particular frame to make sense of what is perceived as reality, or “fact”. The implications of semantic selection, or language in general, when dealing with the teaching and socialization of students (whether at primary, secondary or professional levels) are manifold, as they imprint in individuals particular frames or ways of understanding and making sense of the “reality” around them, and the subsequent attitudes with which they will engage (or not) with it. This is why signifiers (or words) were crucial for Jacques Lacan, seeing them as key to desire, and therefore the centre of attention for psychoanalytic practice. For Lacan, a symptom is a word trapped in the body.

This power exerted through words in the ability to construct and change reality is also documented by J.L. Austin in his short but tremendously relevant series of lectures “How to do things with words”. In this lecture first given in 1955, Austin introduces the notion of “performative utterances” or “speech acts” to refer to utterances that cannot really be judged as “true or false” but that generate a series of effects, or a change in the before and after the pronunciation of those words. For example, when a pastor or priest says the words “I now pronounce you husband and wife”, the marital status of those involved change in that very minute. The same is true when someone dictates a will and says, “I bequeath my watch to my brother”, as that utterance acquires a legal nature at the moment of its pronunciation.

As we can see, the use and control of linguistic categories play a central role in the ideological interpellation and configuration of a subject. As Stanley Aronowitz (cited by Apple, 1979) recognizes, “...hegemony operates in large part through the control of meaning, through the manipulation of the very categories and modes of thinking we commonsensically employ” (p. 154).

In the ideological effects in the formation of subjectivity through curricular practice, there are also other elements at work.

These could be referred to as non-discursive elements (a qualification that could be debated), but that nonetheless play an important role in the process of subjection, and include aspects such as physical space, use and management of time, as well as institutional procedures for evaluation, certification, and granting of credentials. Each of these aspects “say” something about our place in the world, about the delimitations of possibility and autonomy, relations of hierarchy, and so on, thus performing a kind of interpellation for individuals to assume a particular subject position.

In this context, what the Jesuit schools in Cataluña, Spain, have been experimenting lately becomes interesting to look at, as they are troubling some of the features that are taken for granted within the modern school: they got rid of all compartmentalization of school subjects, classrooms, lectures and even recess time. Instead, they are working on collaborative projects, led and assisted by three teachers of different disciplines in each class. Groups of students can decide when they need to take a break and when they are ready to go back to their projects.

What type of subject - citizen could potentially emerge from a type of socialization and education such as this?

Unlike a direct speech that interpellates a group category, as we discussed earlier, these other non-discursive aspects of curriculum (like physical space, practices of evaluation, etc.) are experienced at a more intimate, subjective level, often below conscious or cognitive reflection.

The subjective experience of the educational system finds its efficacy in that the experience is taken as something that is a fact, or something that is simply true about us and the world, because it is *lived*.

### **The ideological subject and the birth of resistance**

The success of certain ideologies in getting established and becoming resistant to challenge can begin to be answered and understood with the elements of psychic formation discussed so far. Curriculum designs and educational practices, in their preoccupation with improvement, have often focused on issues of practice (sometimes misunderstood as merely actions to be implemented) and with policies, overlooking and even dismissing the subject (Pinar, 2011). In this sense, perhaps the success of conservative, right wing ideologies expressed in the widespread reach of neoliberalism, can be explained

at least partially, as an effect of their discursive ability to appeal to the *individual* as an agent who can take action and make decisions, rather than to abstract group categories, thus, playing into the subject's desire and identification with freedom, agency and autonomy.

This way, and once ideological content gets to be part of the psychic core of subjectivity, the assumptions and perceptions that they generate saturate the common sense, becoming not only attached, but rather a constitutive element in a subject's perception of identity. Ideologies, then, mimic value systems and experiences deeply cherished as "who we are". Thus, their resistance to challenge. When facing a situation that is perceived as a potential threat to our identity or to our value system, even the presentation of facts and arguments hold very little convincing power in relation to the more radical and passionate attachments to the desires and fantasies that operate behind our sense of identity and preferences.

If one is to understand how is it that ideology works, engendering such deeply felt commitments, it is crucial to take an analytic look at the psychic process involved in its installation. In that effort, and drawing on the psychoanalytic critique of Judith Butler, I have suggested that ideological components are not only embedded within the psychic structure of individuals, but that subjectivity itself is actually produced and reproduced through ideological action.

Commenting on Butler's "The psychic life of power" (1997), Rosalyn Diprose (1999) points out that "asking about the psychic form that power [or ideology] takes is the same as asking how we become an agent who can desire and act beyond the terms of our own subordination to the power [curriculum] that constitute us" (p. 125).

What is interesting to note here in this “acting beyond the terms of subordination” is that the psychic formations of ideology do not and cannot produce a certain subject position in individuals in a straight-forward, automatic way, according to a predefined plan. At the same time, the exertion of power (through curriculum, for example) provides, simultaneously, the necessary conditions for the subject to emerge in his or her own terms, in response to interpellation.

This response sets the space for the possibility of ignoring a certain interpellation or constructing a self in direct opposition to that interpellation. In my own experience, for example, in the process of becoming a certified teacher, I strategically studied, “learned”, and performed well on courses that dealt mainly with discourses related to psychological approaches to human development or evaluation based on measurement, but very soon in my practice I disregarded those discourses and made a rational effort to construct myself as a teacher in direct opposition to what had been modelled for me in my own experience as a student, and to the instrumental discourses that I was presented with in university.

This is precisely what happens in the opposite way too, when the curriculum sets out to produce a particular predefined outcome, for example, to educate teachers as “critically reflective practitioners”, while the evidence of pedagogical practice shows that the teacher as a critical reflective professional remains largely an “unrealized promise” (Russell, 2012).

In this effort to understand the ideological aspect of subject formation there is a crucial need for a critical awareness that curriculum is about the forming of a particular type of subject for a particular type of society. In this sense, it is then fundamental for an honest, ethical and engaged practice to bring to the surface



our assumptions, notions and commitments regarding what we think of when we think of the world, society, others, etc. and their relationships. This same “stripping” of underlying assumptions is necessary for our students, if one is to have any reach into the analysis and understanding of their motives and possibilities for change.

This is so because ideology hinges on desire and the actualization of the self. In sum, and as Freeden points out, following Althusser, “ideology happens in us, not to us” (p. 30).

### **Beyond reproduction**

The sociological critique of Michael Apple played an unquestionable role in exposing the reproductive theory embedded in mainstream and, particularly, economic approaches to education. In his account, such deterministic approaches conceive schools as a “black box”. As Apple explains:

“Many economists and not a few sociologists and historians of education have a peculiar way of looking at schools. They envision the institution of schooling as something like a black box. One measures input before students enter schools and then measures output along the way or when “adults” enter the labour force. What actually goes on within the black box –what is taught, the concrete experience of children and teachers- is less important in this view than the more global and macroeconomic considerations of rate of return on investment or, more radically, the reproduction of the division of labour. While these are important considerations, perhaps especially that dealing with the role of the school as a reproductive force in an unequal society, by the very nature of a vision of school as black box they cannot demonstrate how these effects are built within schools” (1978, p. 368).

Perhaps not entirely surprisingly, Apple’s diagnosis of the situation remains a relevant one for understanding present day practices of schooling. At an

international level, we are experiencing a regressive move not only to policies but also narratives of education that operate explicitly under the same belief and technological mindset of input-output, of efficient means to an (undecided) end. As he notes, the economic view of the black box cannot illuminate how certain dynamics in education take place. However, remaining exclusively at the sociological -and even at the cognitive and affective- level of social, cultural, and political relations, also cannot account for ideological passionate attachments, and the more intimate psychic dynamics from which they emerge.

In contrast, a psychoanalytic approach - like one sustained in the work of Jacques Lacan- shows that the relation of the self with itself and with others is something fundamentally mediated by more primordial psychic processes and modulated by language, creating the conditions for certain symptomatic expressions to emerge (or not). These conditions, and the resulting relations that are established, do not find their origin and sustainability in knowledge (facts or information) alone, but rather in desire.

At first glance, the psychoanalytic account –particularly in its emphasis on language- could be read as perhaps another theory of reproduction, just as that of Apple’s, though simply a more sophisticated one.

However, and in contrast with deterministic perspectives that remain at the surface of the issue of curriculum, ideology, and subjectivity, i.e. consciousness, politics, economics, etc., when taken seriously, opening up the problem in Lacanian psychoanalytic terms offers a radically different perspective: one that shows the rather wild possibilities of desire, enjoyment, love and aggressivity, along with other aspects of (un)conscious psychic life. These “wild” aspects resist determination and cannot be consciously organized, controlled, nor predicted in their effects. The direction of these energies of desire, however, can

be worked with once we acknowledge their presence and their places of origin: this is the first therapeutic principle of the “talking cure”.

By transitioning, thus, from a historicist, social-science approach to a more universalistic, speculative one, we bring into play the perhaps less accessible and yet decisive role of suffering, passions, dreams, fears, memories, love, attachments and hopes. These are the elements that inscribe and conform the ego, or the subjective sense of “who I am”, and are intimately involved in whatever idea we hold on to, or action we get involved with.

All these components find expression in and through the use of signifying chains, or language. It is clear, then, that it is in discursive practice through which we cover and uncover desire. This is not only useful in the work of analyzing the (un)conscious material that gives purchase to our ideological attachments: it is also the condition for a more meaningful and potentially transformative educational experience. If we understand curriculum as a (complicated) conversation (Pinar, 2008), we must not forget the implications of the invitation embedded in the Latin origin of the word conversation (*con-versare*) which can be translated as “to change together”.

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