

The background of the cover is a photograph of a sunset over the ocean. The sky is a deep, vibrant red, and the sun is a bright yellow-orange orb, partially obscured by horizontal motion blur. The ocean surface is dark with small ripples, and a large, white-capped wave is breaking in the foreground, its spray catching the light.

# STUDENTS AS CURRICULUM

WILLIAM H. SCHUBERT AND BRIAN D. SCHULTZ

A VOLUME IN LANDSCAPES OF EDUCATION

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# Students as Curriculum

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By

**William H. Schubert**  
*University of Illinois Chicago*

and

**Brian D. Schultz**  
*Miami University*



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# CONTENTS

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Preface and Acknowledgments . . . . .	xi
1. Dialogic Introduction <i>William H. Schubert and Brian D. Schultz</i> . . . . .	1
2. Students as Curriculum <i>William H. Schubert and Brian D. Schultz</i> . . . . .	7
Interlude . . . . .	19
3. What Is Worthwhile: From Knowing and Needing to Being and Sharing <i>William H. Schubert</i> . . . . .	23
4. Excerpt From <i>Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way: Lessons From an Urban Classroom (10th Anniversary Edition)</i> <i>Brian D. Schultz</i> . . . . .	43
Interlude . . . . .	65
5. Teacher Education as Theory Development <i>William H. Schubert</i> . . . . .	67
6. Navigating Curricular Controversies, Teaching in the Cracks, and Threshold Concepts <i>Brian D. Schultz</i> . . . . .	83
Interlude . . . . .	95
7. Toward Curricula That Are Of, By, and Therefore for Students <i>William H. Schubert and Ann Lynn Lopez Schubert</i> . . . . .	97
8. Curricular Possibilities: Listening to, Hearing, and Learning From Students <i>Brian D. Schultz</i> . . . . .	119
Interlude . . . . .	127

vi CONTENTS

9. Curriculum as Cultural Experience in Student Lives <i>William H. Schubert and Ann Lopez Schubert</i> . . . . .	129
10. Of Kids and Cokes: Learning From, With, and Alongside Children <i>Brian D. Schultz</i> . . . . .	145
Interlude . . . . .	149
11. On the Practical Value of Practical Inquiry for Teachers and Students <i>William H. Schubert</i> . . . . .	151
Interlude . . . . .	175
12. Teacher Lore: A Basis for Understanding Praxis <i>William H. Schubert</i> . . . . .	177
Interlude . . . . .	203
13. Pedagogical Pivoting, Emergent Curriculum, and Knowledge Production <i>Brian D. Schultz and Stephanie Pearson</i> . . . . .	205
Interlude . . . . .	229
14. Teacher and Student Lore: Their Ways of Looking at It <i>William H. Schubert</i> . . . . .	231
Interlude . . . . .	241
15. A Shorty Teaching Teachers: Student Insight and Perspective on “Keeping It Real” in the Classroom <i>Brian D. Schultz and Paris Banks</i> . . . . .	243
Interlude . . . . .	257
16. Students as Action Researchers: Historical Precedent and Contradiction <i>William H. Schubert</i> . . . . .	259
Interlude . . . . .	277
17. Teaching in the Cracks: Student Engagement Through Social Action Curriculum Projects <i>Brian D. Schultz, Jennifer McSurley, and Milli Salguero</i> . . . . .	279

Interlude . . . . . 297

18. Outside Curriculum and Public Pedagogy  
*William H. Schubert* . . . . . 299

Interlude . . . . . 315

19. Curriculum in the Making: Theory, Practice,  
 and Social Action Curriculum Projects  
*Brian D. Schultz and Jon Baricovich* . . . . . 317

Interlude . . . . . 339

20. The Curriculum-Curriculum:  
 Experiences in Teaching Curriculum  
*William H. Schubert* . . . . . 341

Interlude . . . . . 359

21. Perspectives on Educational Evaluation From Curricular  
 Contexts  
*William H. Schubert* . . . . . 361

Interlude: Our Conclusion . . . . . 389

References . . . . . 391

Permissions and Licenses. . . . . 395

About the Authors . . . . . 401

## Praise for *Students as Curriculum*

*In Students as Curriculum, Bill Schubert and Brian Schultz juxtapose some of their own carefully selected individual writings in order to welcome readers into their decades-long conversation. Dialogic interludes between the curated texts provide insight into their mutual influence. Since the time that Bill chaired Brian's dissertation committee, their mentor-student relationship has become that of esteemed colleagues and cherished friends. Their shared intellectual journey encapsulates one of the volume's most important themes: the limitless transformative potential that is unleashed when educators are open to learning with and from their students.*

—**Isabel Nuñez**, professor and dean, School of Education, Purdue University Fort Wayne, president of the American Educational Studies Association, past vice president of the American Educational Research Association

*Throughout this challenging and deeply inspiring book, William Schubert and Brian Schultz illuminate as well as embody the very concept of "students as curriculum." In so doing, they provide both personal and research-based portraits of what happens when students, alongside their classmates and teachers, are encouraged to explore what they themselves might wish to consider as worth experiencing and knowing.*

*Even as the authors, both individually and in conversation with one another, also recursively interrogate their own in- and out-of-school experiences, they primarily attend to what has and continues to shape their perceptions of what is worthwhile to apprehend, to know, to teach. Ever cognizant of continuing neoliberally oriented insistences on curriculum standardization and commodifiable skills, Schubert and Schultz refuse such by enacting multiple relational aspects of being and becoming both students and teachers. Together, they welcome and learn from productive uncertainties, from curriculum histories' insights, and from listening to, hearing and learning from students as well as from one another.*

*Generous too in their acknowledgments of the substantial contributions of coauthors for various of the book's chapters, William Schubert and Brian Schultz, throughout this text, offer crucial arguments and vital exemplifications for all educators who wish to learn and teach with and for "students as curriculum."*

*I am honored to highly recommend this outstanding book.*

—**Janet L. Miller**, professor emerita, Teachers College, Columbia University

*William Schubert and Brian Schultz synthesize decades of practical and scholarly work into a provocative and essential text for educators in any venue and at every level. In Students as Curriculum these cutting edge thinkers combine forces and offer a clear and readable work for teachers, parents, scholars, activists, organizers, and policy makers who are asking fundamental questions about the challenges of educating free people to think freely. This book is for anyone who is looking uneasily at the world as it is, and is searching for an education of enlightenment and liberation for the time ahead.*

—**William Ayers**, distinguished professor of education (retired), University of Illinois Chicago, and host of the podcast *Under the Tree: A Seminar on Freedom*

*A powerfully thoughtful and important book about a compelling democratic idea, Students as Curriculum is much needed in classrooms and schools. Schubert and Schultz offer deep and broad wisdom about why and how to make sure students are centered in all aspects of their learning.*

—**Carl A. Grant**, Hoefs-Bascom Professor, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and author of *Examining Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" as a Counternarrative: Understanding the Black Family and Black Students*

*As one might expect from Professors Schubert and Schultz, this is a "collected works" publication like no other. Brilliantly conceived, Students as Curriculum allows the reader to experience transactional and transformative ideas that have helped to define the field of curriculum. The beautifully-sequenced collection of readings, along with thoughtfully constructed contemporary interludes, displays the impact of listening, hearing, and learning among mentors, students, teachers, and colleagues. The featured works are insightful and thought-provoking, and the publication offers innovative ways for collaboration while also suggesting new directions for research in curriculum studies.*

—**Craig Kridel**, E. S. Gambrell Professor Emeritus of Educational Studies, University of South Carolina

*In Students as Curriculum, Bill Schubert and Brian Schultz help educators see their students as curricula. This critical insight urges teachers to see the potential of a curriculum rooted in students' lived experiences as foundational to the practice of participatory democracy. I highly recommend this book. Its ideas are necessary and timely as it challenges the current propensity to drain the curriculum of its greatest possibilities.*

—**Denise Taliaferro Baszile**, professor and dean of the College of Education, Wayne State University-Detroit, past president of the American Educational Studies Association, past vice president of the American Educational Research Association

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This book is a compilation of previously published manuscripts by William H. Schubert and Brian D. Schultz that centers on the ideas related to *students as curriculum*. Several of the pieces have coauthors. Among the chapters, we (Bill and Brian) engage in dialogue and commentary with each other to introduce the main tenets of the piece or pieces that follow.

We would like to especially thank Ming Fang He for suggesting that we put together a book of previously published essays, and for her overall support of this book project. Many of the selections in this volume were influenced by the late Ann Lopez Schubert, including some which were coauthored with Bill. As such, Ann's insightful participation is recognized and appreciated. Henry Schubert is thanked for careful proofreading and discussion of ideas. Bill gives special credit, too, to inspiring ways in which his daughter, Heidi, his grandson, Kevin (both teachers), who listen to and learn from students as curriculum. Some of the other selections were coauthored with Brian. Many thanks to Brian's former fifth-grade student Paris Banks, former graduate students Jon Baricovich, Milli Salguero, Jen McSurley, and colleague Stephanie Pearson for their participation and support of this collection. Brian's former graduate assistant, Sarah Simões Dias Da Silva, was instrumental in digitally organizing Bill's previously published scholarship that helped contribute to this volume. Much appreciation and love from Brian to Jenn, Addi, and Keegan, as well as his parents, for their ongoing support, listening, and feedback. We also want to thank the strong team at Information Age Publishing.

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## CHAPTER 1

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# DIALOGIC INTRODUCTION

**William H. Schubert and Brian D. Schultz**

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Bill & Brian: This introduction is written in dialogic form to be consistent with the intercalary commentary we provide between chapters. It also captures the 20-plus year history of our work and study together, first in a mentor-student relation, and then in a collegial friendship.

Bill: Thanks for selecting writings from a 50-year span that have contributed to your thought, study, teaching, and publications. It was doubtless a daunting task to find about a dozen from the 200 to 300 publications I sent to you initially, when we decided to do this project.

Brian: Indeed, Bill, it was a challenging task to make the selections! Each time we visited or spoke about this project, a clearer picture of how to select and organize the book became more evident. Unsurprisingly, over the past 2 years since we embarked on the idea for this book, each conversation at a conference or over the phone prompted deliberations. We continuously tweaked the overall umbrella theme for the volume, changed specific publications to include, seemingly always found a different sequence based on our discussions, and ultimately, decided to include some of my writings that were influenced by or built upon yours.

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*Students as Curriculum*, pp. 1–5

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## 2 Students as Curriculum

- Bill: I am fascinated to learn about ways my writing has affected your writing and related contributions over the years. This is a large part of the reason for not presenting them in chronological order. They seem to be a kind of *apperceptive mass* (to use Herbart's provocative term) or a Deweyan embodied experience that make the past form our present and future—seeing past, present, and future as a holistic agglomeration rather than distinct entities.
- Brian: Since I enrolled in my first doctoral class with you over two decades ago, your scholarship has had a profound effect on me as an educator, and as a person. Initially, your ideas and the readings associated with the foundations of curriculum course directly influenced my (then) teaching fifth-graders in a Chicago public school serving a housing project community, and later as I transitioned into the professoriate. The very ideas in our first encounter prompted me to reflect on my own educational experiences, and it was in that classroom on Harrison Street where I began to contemplate and theorize about how these ideas could affect students' learning and teachers' teaching. This kind of theorizing, where I can see myself and my students can see themselves as knowledge producers because of who they are and what they experience, has profoundly impacted me.
- Bill: I have come to call this agglomeration *the theory within*. This has had a major impact on me for longer than I can pinpoint. We published about the *theory within* in *Curriculum Books: The First Eighty Years* (Schubert & Lopez Schubert, 1980, pp. 347–348), and even earlier in a small journal named *Insights* (Schubert, 1977), used for many years by the John Dewey Society for scholars to share seeds of ideas that they hoped to develop more fully. I called a piece in that journal *On the Need to Develop Personal Theory* and consider it a precursor to *the theory within*. But when I reflect more fully on this *theory within* persons, I think back to discussions with key friends and relatives in my childhood and youth, because it was at the heart of my on-going concern for self-education. By my sophomore year in college, I concluded that when formal education was at its best, it was also about developing the mysterious, ever-evolving, sometimes devolving theory within me. When I began to teach in elementary school, I saw my students as evolving theories of the lives they lived. My challenge as a

teacher was to continuously figure out how to enhance their lifelong process of constructing perspectives that helped them live meaningfully in situations they encountered as they continued living in the world. I think that this relates to the book that you reviewed written by Ralph Nader's sister, Claire Nader, which is a call to teenagers to commit to serious self-education (Bennett-Kinne & Schultz, 2023; Nader, 2022). It makes me think of Doris Lessing's (1962) appeal to youths in her *The Golden Notebook* to eschew propaganda, the biggest (then and now) extant threat to education and human improvement.

Brian: I am glad that you brought that recent book review into this conversation. One of my key take-aways from Claire's book is that young people must ask questions about issues in their lives. This aligns quite well with our ideas about empowering young people to be at the center of the schooling (and out of schooling) experiences where their questions and curiosities guide their learning.

Bill: At any rate, we experience and interpret in life, so it makes sense to do the same in this book about our shared life experiences. The intercalary is inspired by John Steinbeck's (1939) *Grapes of Wrath* in which he intersperses the narrative with interpretations of its meaning. I think of Steinbeck as an exemplar of the kind of work we are doing, because your selection of articles and chapters is couched in the interaction/transaction (as John Dewey might say) of the story of our 20-some years of relating to each other. This is similar to the way George Willis and I did the prologue, perspectives, illustrations, and the epilogue of our book on the myriad ways that 35 scholars drew upon the arts and diverse literatures in theorizing about and enacting curriculum and teaching (Willis & Schubert, 1991).

Brian: Thanks for raising the Deweyan idea of interaction/transaction. I recall you introducing me to Louise Rosenblatt's work (1938, 1978) that was heavily influenced by Dewey's premise of transaction. Learning about reader-response theory and understanding that individuals will take away different meaning, ideas, and thoughts from texts based on their experiences in life is another way that really helps to center students in curriculum making. In addition, I think our compilation of first your writings and then some of mine that were inspired or prompted by your work may

#### 4 *Students as Curriculum*

be an example of this kind of transaction between your texts and me.

Bill: I see our book, *Students as Curriculum*, as our statement of interactions and transactions of our work, texts, and contributions.

Brian: We need to make sure we are emphatic here: Our statement is an insistence on the necessary and neglected inclusion of students in all aspects of curriculum work.

As you are well aware, I have leaned heavily on your theorizing over the years to allow students' priority concerns to be the starting point for a curriculum that evolves and emerges from those things the students find important and relevant.

Bill: When we joined Ming Fang He in editing *The SAGE Guide to Curriculum in Education* (He et al., 2015) we decided to be forthright about stating this insistence. (Readers interested in learning about other diverse perspectives related to students as curriculum can refer to Section Three of the *The SAGE Guide to Curriculum in Education*.) Our work seemed to culminate toward a crescendo of emphasis on the primacy of students. I especially saw your work as a teacher theorizing with your students about the curricula that helped them grow as a personal, interpersonal, and community-centered democratic project for your dissertation (Schultz, 2005) and later portrayed in your book, *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* (Schultz, 2008/2018). The concept that conjoins curriculum and students is the essence of the kind of educational experience that I tried to provide for students I taught from elementary school through PhD work and beyond in evolving friendship and collegiality. It is the kind of learning experience that my late wife, Ann, created in multiple venues (Lopez, 1993), and we pursued together for more than 30 years. It involves what I like to call *action inquiry*, a term I imagined with a friend in college in the 1960s, and in graduate school realized it flowed throughout John Dewey's corpus of work on reflective thought, later evident in Joseph Schwab's (1970) practical, quasi-practical, and eclectic inquiry (Schubert, 1980), Herbert Thelen's (1972) quest to understand education, and in Donald Schön's (1983) characterization of practitioners' reflections on and in action. There are many more possible antecedents; however, I vividly recall you as an elementary teacher working on your

dissertation and talking about curriculum theorists speaking to you as you taught, enabling you to improvisationally interact with students, who at age ten or eleven were theorizing in their own ways if you only listened to and learned from them, as you later expressed through an anthology (Schultz, 2011). Some of the faculty members on your dissertation committee were dubious about whether that kind of theorizing was possible or a figment of your imagination. Nevertheless, the dissertation became a best-selling book of Teachers College Press (Schultz, 2008) and a decade later was reprinted and updated with a special anniversary edition (Schultz, 2018). That this kind of reflection-in-action is possible occurs on many levels is revealed through many pieces selected for this book. To me, then, it makes sense to include our piece on *Students as Curriculum* first even though it was written 40 years after beginning my career in higher education, and 4 years after I retired. It is a kind of organizer in advance that provides a nonchronological connection in the projection of ideas/praxes/articles/chapters presented here.

Brian: It is true that I thought about curriculum studies literature while teaching in my fifth-grade classroom. There were doubters for sure, including some of those on my dissertation committee, but I found grounding and guidance from writings about the imaginative potential of curriculum.

I appreciate our non-linear approach to how we chose to organize this book. It certainly makes good sense to me that we begin with framing our argument and intention to center students in curriculum making. This contention sets the stage for how we engage in the critical praxis associated with this work through both theory development and practical examples that are seen in subsequent chapters.

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## CHAPTER 2

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# STUDENTS AS CURRICULUM

**William H. Schubert and Brian D. Schultz**

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Who knows what is worthwhile for the educational benefit of a student? The phrase *students as curriculum* refers to a tradition of perspectives on curriculum and teaching that have persisted in education for over a century (Schultz, 2011), fostering an ongoing debate. What knowledge and content should be devised, developed, and designed for and taught to students to enable them to become more fully functioning members of society? Should curriculum development be exclusively the prerogative of credentialed adults, educational experts, and policymakers, or should it involve the public, parents, and students themselves? If curriculum as subject matter is designed by experts, is it received by all students in the same way? Or do students mediate what is presented by accepting, rejecting, and refashioning it according to the lenses they have developed through their unique experiential, cultural, and other contextual background? If so, even if all students are presented with the same content and engaged in the same learning activities, is the learning they derive the same or different? Thus, the interpretation of content and learning experiences may be a basis for concluding that the student, at least in part, *is the curriculum*.

If students are curriculum in the sense that they shape it through their sources of meaning, should they be involved proactively in the process of curriculum development? Does such involvement call for democratic construction of curriculum by students and teachers in concert with one

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*Students as Curriculum*, pp. 7–18

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another? How does this fit with the fact that policymakers outside of classrooms and schools often make curricula and bestow them on schools? Moreover, is the student also the curriculum when the larger educational project is deemed to be a process of developing self-understanding and self-direction in the world? Who is best positioned to know if this is being accomplished: policymakers, educational leaders, teachers, parents, or students themselves? From another angle, when one considers that any classroom or learning environment usually contains many participants, do they not also learn from and with the relationships they have with one another? In this sense students can easily be construed as curricula for each other. Teachers, too, learn from, with, and alongside their students, so should we not view students as curricula for the continuing education of teachers? If that is so, should policymakers who create curricular mandates learn from students, thus from perceiving students as curricula for them as they presume to determine curricula that are best for students?

### **CONTEMPORARY CONCERNS ABOUT STUDENTS AS CURRICULUM**

Teachers ask: “Why aren’t students interested in the material we present?” Is it possible that the students perceive no connections in curriculum that appear relevant to their lives? Should students be expected to be receptacles of learning that has no apparent worth to them? Educators of adults often say that their students demand to see relevance, and we consider younger students to be less mature than adults, so why should educators expect children and youths to become docile recipients of what someone else has determined to be of value or worth to them?

Teachers lament: “Students are disruptive or else just sit there without engaging in the curriculum. Sometimes they try to derail the curriculum by becoming disruptive or by pushing for digression to other topics.” Could it be that students have given up on finding worthwhile ideas, knowledge, experiences, and skills in schools? Should they be expected to deem the curriculum worthwhile, or should they accept it and the rationale that someday they will use it and realize its relevance? When they push for digressions, are they merely seeing if they can transform boredom into entertainment, accepting the idea that schooling will not be meaningful? In so pushing, can they become curriculum—the subject matter of what is learned from unintended curriculum of schooling? When students are of a different social class, race, ethnicity, or culture from the teacher, might they assume that the curriculum is an importation from such difference or an imposition that implicitly says that their background is inferior, in need of revision, or irrelevant to what is worthwhile?