

Critical Education

Volume 7 Number 4 March 1, 2016 ISSN 1920-4125

Reconstruction of the Fables *The Myth of Education for Democracy, Social* *Reconstruction and Education for Democratic Citizenship*

Todd S. Hawley
Kent State University

Andrew L. Hostetler
Peabody College at Vanderbilt University

Evan Mooney
Montclair State University

Citation: Hawley T. S., Hostetler, A. L., & Mooney, E. (2016). Reconstruction of the fables: The myth of education for democracy, social reconstruction and education for democratic citizenship. *Critical Education*, 7(4). Retrieved from <http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/criticaled/article/view/186116>

Abstract

A central goal of social studies education is to prepare students for citizenship in a democracy. Further, trends in the social, political, and economic circumstances, currently and historically in American education and society broadly suggest that: 1) a need for change exists, 2) that change is possible and can be brought about through a reconsideration of social reconstructionist ideas and values, especially those espoused by George Counts, and 3) that social studies teachers and teacher educators can work toward this change through educational practices. In this paper, we argue for these three points through a critical discussion of a perpetuated myth of democratic education.



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“Man is fed with fables through life, and leaves it in the belief he knows something of what has been passing, when in truth he has known nothing but what has passed under his own eye.”

- Thomas Jefferson

“To refuse to face the task of creating a vision of a future America immeasurably more just and noble and beautiful than the America of today is to evade the most crucial, difficult, and important educational task.”

- George Counts

Introduction

Despite a turbulent and highly contested history, it is generally accepted that social studies courses and social educators are charged with preparing citizens for life in a democratic society (Evans, 2006; Nelson, 2001; Saxe, 1991; Stanley, 2001; Vinson, 2006). Competing conceptions abound within social education regarding the aims and scope of education for democratic citizenship (Barr, Barth, & Shermis, 1977; Barton & Levstik, 2004; Counts, 1939; Newmann, 1975; Parker, 2003; Ravich & Finn, 1987; Ross, 2006; Stanley, 2001; Stanley & Nelson, 1986). These competing conceptions have resulted in a wide range of approaches to, and thoughts about what education for democracy is and looks like. What it means to educate democratic citizens remains contentious. Despite this constant debate, and decades of educational reforms, social studies teaching and learning has changed little (Evans, 2006, 2015).

According to Ronald W. Evans (2011) efforts to reform social studies teaching and learning have historically faced two constant sources of tension: “curriculum politics and the entrenched dilemma of classroom constancy” (p. 2). Curriculum politics are currently embodied by the influence of the accountability movement and related reforms. Curriculum constancy, on the other hand, is “embodied in the failure of classroom practice to live up to its potential for interesting, engaging, teaching worthy of our nation and the questions, social issues, and problems we face as citizens.” (p. 2). As a whole, Evans’ analysis painted a grim picture of the possibilities of reforming the constraints facing social studies teachers.

Despite this grim picture, we recognize the ongoing efforts teachers and teacher educators can make a difference. As Ritchie (2012) highlighted, “a countermovement exists in U.S. schools, preschool through 12th grade. In spite of the draconian reforms, many teachers provide opportunities for their students to be problem posers, problem solvers, independent and critical thinkers, creative innovators, democratic collaborators, and politically active citizens” (pp. 120-121). It is this countermovement that hope to tap into as we begin to reconstruct the fables of democracy and the myths of education for democratic citizenship.

The Social Reconstructionists

Throughout the history of American education, there have been periods of ideological struggle between teachers, administrators, policy makers, the public, and other educational stakeholders who have different conceptions of the purpose of education (see Cremin, 1961; James, 1995; Teitelbaum, 1993). The political and economic climate of the Great Depression fueled questions about the relationships between democracy, equality, capitalism, and education in American society. Within this atmosphere, the social reconstructionists, a group of educational

historians and theorists, led by George S. Counts, William H. Kilpatrick, and Harold Rugg, offered pointed criticisms of the prevailing educational, social, economic, and political conditions (Gutek, p.17, in Riley, 2006).

These social reconstructionists maintained a specific interpretation of the purpose of education; “If the schools are to be really effective, they must become centers for the building, and not merely the contemplation, of our civilization” (Counts, 1932, p. 37). Similarly, John Dewey (1934) recognized how “teachers and administrators often say they must ‘conform to conditions’ rather than do what they would personally prefer to do. They [conditions] are highly unstable; social conditions are running in different, often opposed directions” (p. 11). These critiques, by two prominent educational theorists of the twentieth-century, highlight the idea that education should prepare students to create a more just society, rather than equip them to perpetuate the status quo.

The discourse of the 1930’s exhibited an urgent call for radical change in society through education. A discourse that emerged, and faded away, temporarily, in a period of social and political upheaval. After the stock market crashed, economic and political conditions were ripe for a critical focus upon the tensions between free-market capitalism and democracy. *The Social Frontier*, the journal of the social reconstructionists, was one venue through which they hoped to spread the message of education for social change. The 1930’s saw the rise and fall of *The Social Frontier* largely because of shifting political allegiances among the contributors and readers. That our argument for significant social change through education comes at a time of relative social and economic stability in comparison, does not minimize the need for change. The social reconstructionist objective, to transform society through education, remains relevant to educational reform (Stanley, 2006, p.89).

Our argument takes up George Counts’ broad vision of the purpose for education. While social reconstructionist philosophy has undergone numerous iterations over the 20th century, we chose to draw specifically upon the thinking and writing of George Counts and the social Reconstructionists of the 1930’s for several reasons. Various educational movements throughout the 20th century have sought to reform education to reflect a deeper social, political, and economic democracy. However, Counts’ social reconstructionist viewpoint retains a unique interpretation of principles of social and economic equality rooted in a powerful critique of American political economy. With Social Democratic tenets underpinning their interpretations of American society and education, Counts, Harold Rugg, and Theodore Brameld took what many consider an extreme position on the hope that education could uphold the democratic promise of America within a capitalist economy. Their position held that “...a truly democratic social order could not happen unless the capitalist economy of the United States was eliminated ‘or changed so radically in form and spirit that its identity will be completely lost’” (Counts, 1932, p.47, in Stanley, 2005, p.283). Our shared belief in the power of capitalism and the status quo to stymie a deeper democracy for all citizens led us to take up and explore Counts’ social reconstructionist vision for democratic education as a way to rethink social studies education.

Further, we view the contrasting visions of social reconstructionists, with their focus on education for democratic and social purposes, and more traditional understandings, which envision education as a vehicle to perpetuate the political, economic, and social status quo, as representative of the contested nature of education. Our analysis of contemporary and historical understandings of social reconstructionist objectives and methods necessarily exists within this contested space. Our goal here is to show how the historical and contemporary expressions of

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social reconstructionist values support an argument that meaningful social change can occur through social studies education for democracy. Given our current economic and political climate in the United States, we felt it particularly appropriate to revisit and re-imagine Counts' social reconstructionist vision for social education where social studies teachers and teacher educators prepare student citizens to enact a more socially just form of democratic citizenship.

Framing the Argument

We begin with two sections that explore the historical and contemporary literature that presents and engages with social reconstructionist ideas. The historical review primarily explores the scholarship of George S. Counts and several other social reconstructionists of the 1930's and their journal *The Social Frontier*. The contemporary review examines recent scholarship that attempts to revive reconstructionist philosophies for the purpose of educational and societal reform. The final section of the article presents an argument for how reconstructionist philosophies are applicable in social studies teacher education and social studies classrooms.

We hope that this article can open spaces within the social studies community for rethinking how Counts' social reconstructionist vision might challenge the myth of education for democracy in social studies teacher education and classrooms. Throughout the paper we focus our efforts on unraveling the myth of education for democracy. Given the contentious nature of the debate regarding worthwhile approaches to educating democratic citizens, even within the social reconstructionists themselves, we felt it fertile ground to begin to explore Counts' social reconstructionist vision. Ultimately our goal is to inspire social educators to create new spaces for democratic education to flourish. Here student citizens can begin to actively work to create a more just, democratic world for themselves and others.

Exploring the Myth of Education for Democracy

One of the most persistent ideas perpetuated in public discourse about education is that we already live in a functioning democracy and therefore there is scant need for education to take up issues of enhancing, deepening, or reinventing our democracy. While there is a consistent call for democracy in education within social studies scholarship (see Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Evans, 2007; Kahne & Westheimer, 2003; Parker, 2001), we contend that social education in practice have focused more on notions of democracy rather than lived democracy. Social reconstructionist interpretations that democracy is an ongoing process that is never a complete act (Counts, 1932; 1939; Dewey, 1934) support our desire to alter this perceived reality. Emphases on fulfilling democratic ideals and invoking commitments to principles of democratic living that guide society are visible in current scholarship as well (Murrow, 2011; Ross & Vinson, 2011; Tupper, 2009). Our exploration of historical and contemporary social reconstructionist ideas attempts to pull apart this myth and illustrates how social studies teacher educators and classroom teachers can work to enhance democracy.

Underpinning this myth of education for democracy are issues of economic inequality and citizenship within a democracy. While we focus upon the benefits of Counts' vision of education for democracy to a reconceptualization of social studies education, and consequently to a deepening of democracy, we have critical questions about the frequency with which economic opportunity is purportedly conferred by a free market laissez-faire system in connection to education for democracy. Does "hard work" mitigate the restrictive social

structures of race, class, and gender? By perpetuating an understanding that places the majority of responsibility on the individual, do we obfuscate the challenges that an open economic system poses to alternative conceptions of success that are not predicated on materialism and individualism? We see these questions as central to a discussion of how social education can realize a deeper democracy. Our review of both historical and contemporary scholarly discourse among social reconstructionists suggests that as we strive to propel our society towards a deeper realization of democracy, social educators must necessarily engage with questions about how education negotiates economic inequality.

An additional conception that underlies the myth of education for democracy is the notion of universal citizenship as it seems to be accepted by many in social studies education. Tupper (2009) argued for a need to interrogate notions of citizenship and the assumptions that come with claiming a universal citizenship in a society that views citizenship as a label or status, as does America. In social studies, we often claim to teach for citizenship, but if citizenship is merely a label and considered to be universal (all who are citizens have same rights and responsibilities) then it becomes easy to assume all student-citizens simply need to learn the legal rights and responsibilities of naturalized or natural born citizens. Therefore, teaching students that they are agents for social change as citizens never becomes a focus of social education.

Our discussion of historic and contemporary literature suggests considering or reconsidering the roles and responsibilities of people in society to focus on citizenship education from a view of the citizen as a change agent who works for social change for the collective good. As such, the status of citizen should not simply be a label applied at birth or earned through a citizenship test (Vinson, 2006). Part of rethinking the way social education can work towards a deeper democracy, via an exploration of the understandings of Counts and other social reconstructionists, may include expanding the conversation on what citizenship education might look like in social studies classrooms. While these notions of economic inequality and universal citizenship are seen as supporting elements of education for democracy and are relevant to our thinking, we have chosen to focus our attention on the myth of education for democracy and negotiate these additional issues only as they intersect our primary discussion. Surely, they provide ample space for future discussion and thinking about their part in social education.

Drawing on the Social Reconstructionists: Education *for* Democracy not *about* Democracy

In this section, we introduce the discourse and interpretations of George S. Counts and other social reconstructionist theorists and reveal how these ideas inform our understanding of the ways education fails to teach *for* democracy in favor of teaching *about* democracy. Our purpose is to demonstrate how these historical interpretations continue to be powerful guideposts for a social education focused on active citizenship and realizing democracy. A clear explication of these ideas lays the foundation for subsequent sections that connect current and historical literature and present an argument for drawing on the social reconstructionist values and ideologies in social studies education. Social reconstructionism crystallized in *The Social Frontier* during the 1930's. Counts and Dewey opened the journal by stating the guiding ethics of social reconstructionism; "...*The Social Frontier* assumes that the age of individualism in economy is closing and that an age marked by close integration of social life and collective planning and control is opening" (Editorial Board, 1934, pp.3-5). These scholars maintained that

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education was the avenue through which society would negotiate dramatic shifts in social, economic, and political structures.

Counts' (1932; 1939) work exemplified the social reconstructionists' understanding of democracy. Counts argued that education for democracy should embrace the indoctrination of students into a deeply democratic belief structure (Counts, 1939, p. 17). Counts perceived a fundamental misunderstanding of democracy by the masses, in that educators and the public assumed education automatically served democratic ends. This assumption rested on a widespread acceptance that democracy is individually oriented, which prohibits social and economic democracy from being considered (Counts, 1939, p. 15). Counts argued that, "Our failure is traceable at bottom to a widespread assumption that education is a self-determining process...that inevitably and automatically serves the cause of democracy" (Counts, 1939, p. 15). This powerful, concise statement of the myth that schools automatically teach *for* democracy simply because we live in a democratic nation suggests that, in reality, they teach *about* democracy rather than how to *live* democratically. This interpretation of democracy as unrealized appeared consistently in *The Social Frontier*; "The tragic breakdown of democracy is due to the fact that the identification of liberty with the maximum of unrestrained individualistic action in the economic sphere...is as fatal to the realization for liberty of all as it is fatal to the realization of equality" (Dewey, 1936, pp. 105-106).

Counts also challenged fallacies widely held by the public, related to the intersections of education and democracy, in his observation that the public believed the major responsibility of education in a dynamic society "...is to prepare the individual to adjust himself to social change: No, the individual should have steadfast principles upon which society is constructed" (Counts, 1932, pp. 25-27); "If America is not to be false to the promise of her youth she must make an intelligent and determined effort to fulfill it" (Counts, 1932, p. 40). These critiques of the structure and purpose of education in society are as prescient today as they were eighty years ago, as we are increasingly witness to a society that is democratic in rhetoric but far less so in practice.

Fables and Fairytales: What Does it Mean to Educate Democratic Citizens?

In this section, we focus on making connections between early to mid-20th century social reconstructionists' ideas and similar ideas as they appear in more contemporary work. Here the focus is a result of questions such as; what are the barriers contemporary scholars identify? What are the systems, structures, routines, and institutions that work to preclude social reconstructionist solutions? And, how do these scholars understand the myth of education for democracy? The following reflects our discussion of these questions and situates the myth of educating for democratic citizenship in contemporary literature on reconstructionist ideas.

In conversations with teachers and teacher education students it has become clear to us that a fundamental disconnect exists regarding the purpose of teaching social studies. There is general agreement that preparation for life in society is a key aspect, if not sole purpose, of social education. In our experience, however, many teachers work toward this by teaching students the knowledge and skills to function within the society *as it is* rather than the perspectives, skills, knowledge, and dispositions that are *necessary to change society*. As the democratic educational philosopher Judith M. Green (1999) highlighted, rarely do social studies teachers prepare their students to make or remake our communities as part of developing a deeper democracy. The

assumption that underpins this fundamental disconnect is an assumption about whether or not American society is a democracy already, or a democracy *in progress*. Should American democracy be maintained or constantly reconstructed to be more democratic?

There are varied implications in the language used regarding education for democratic citizenship. If we are teaching for citizenship in a democratic society, then are we preparing students for life in that society as it exists? This we believe is different from teaching for democratic citizenship or for social change. Encouraging students to make judgments about what needs to be changed, how to go about changing it and taking action to do so, is teaching students to live democratically. This notion of democratic citizenship for social change focuses less on accepting existing structures, institutions, and ways of thinking than teaching for citizenship within a society. Making this distinction is a necessary step in developing a defensible rationale for teaching democratic citizenship framed by social reconstructionist values and ideologies.

Recent scholarship has perpetuated the reconstructionist ideas of education *for* democracy rather than *about* democracy. Building upon Paul Taylor's (1961) reiteration of Counts' fundamental concept that "we must decide what ought to be the case...we cannot discover what ought to be the case by investigating what is the case," current scholars argue that if we are to teach for social change, all stakeholders in education must decide, for what kind of society ought we teach (Taylor, 1961, p. 278; cited in Ross & Vinson, 2011, pp. 156-158). Counts (1939) argued in favor of teaching for democracy above other ways of organizing society because by comparison, the values, freedoms, and knowledge afforded individuals in a democracy made it better. Ross and Vinson (2011) revived this idea, "In order to construct meaning for civics and citizenship education, we must engage questions [about democracy and society] not as merely abstract or rhetorical, but in relation to our lived experiences and our professional practice as educators" (p. 156).

This echoes Westheimer and Kahne (2004), whose research demonstrated how social studies can prepare three types of citizens: personally responsible, participatory, or justice oriented. Westheimer and Kahne's analysis of these three types of citizens held implications for the degree to which citizens might be involved in actively working to change society or perpetuate the status quo. We argue a social studies education aimed at preparing socially-just citizens must be informed by social reconstructionist values and ideologies. This, according to Stanley (2005), reinforces the need to simultaneously make and remake society toward a deeper democracy. As Oyler's (2012) research on civic agency and social action projects highlighted, "simply advocating for students to be involved in the public realm is not sufficient for justice-oriented educators: we must simultaneously be creating opportunities to discuss and debate how particular decisions affect all community members" (p. 7). Taking up this approach to social education and citizenship education can become part of the process of undoing the myth of democracy as static, perpetual, and inherent part of society that necessitates only invocation by citizens to remain in place.

Reconstructionist Practice in Social Studies Teacher Education

In this section, we explore the contemporary literature and thinking about the role social studies teacher education might play in addressing and ultimately reconstructing the myth of education for democracy. Drawing briefly on literature related to the social reconstructionist tradition in teacher education and more explicitly on reform efforts in social studies teacher

education, our goal is to highlight ways to move forward within teacher education programs and ultimately within social studies classrooms. It should come as no surprise that social reconstructionists' influence on teacher education mirrors their influence on the social studies. Nor should it come as any great shock that the reconstructionist tradition in teacher education has also maintained a marginalized position compared to more traditional programs and approaches (Liston and Zeichner, 1991).

Writing in the early 1990s, Liston and Zeichner called addressing the marginalized status of the social reconstructionist tradition in teacher education “one of the most critical issues” to be addressed by reform-minded teacher educators (p. 34). More recently, Irvine (2004) called on teacher educators to embrace their role to prepare teachers to be social justice advocates. Our hope is that given the growing response to the current global economic crisis, attacks on unions and organized labor and the occupy movement in the United States, that social conditions might provide leverage for those interested in reforming social studies teacher education programs. This is a necessary step in the process of reframing practices within social studies classrooms.

Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) analysis of the type of democratic citizen schools prepare – personally responsible, participatory, or justice oriented – speaks directly to the potential for social studies teachers to reproduce the status quo *or* to create citizens concerned with creating a socially just democratic society. Explicit examples of justice oriented citizenship projects have been advanced by Oyler (2012) and Rubin (2012). Both propose a social reconstructionist vision of educating for democratic citizenship. Writing about the need for social studies teachers to embrace an activity, justice-oriented stance in US History classrooms, Rubin (2012) noted, “new understandings of youth civic identity development indicate that traditional social studies curricula and pedagogies need to be radically transformed if we are serious about creating civic learning opportunities for all students” (p. 9).

Oyler's (2012) research was based on a conception of democratic living that “relies on citizens who understand that their own individual well-being is tied up in the commonwealth of the community” that is primarily concerned with “pluralism, the common good, and understanding human difference” (p. 6). Oyler (2012) and Rubin's (2012) work provide exemplars for teachers and teacher educators interested in creating classroom spaces for students to engage their local communities while exploring the myth of education for democracy. Oyler (2012) in particular provides specific examples of teachers creating democratic spaces and connections between schools and local communities to address social justice issues.

Discussion: Reconstructing the Fables

In this article, we have attempted to draw out connections between the social reconstructionist values and ideologies of the past and contemporary scholarship that invokes similar conceptions of the purpose of education. We then applied these past and present ideas to a prevalent myth that education *for* democracy is the same as education *about* democracy, in an effort to demonstrate how such exercises can assist in deconstructing myths and moving education towards a more fully realized democracy. What does all this mean for social studies teacher education and social studies teachers going forward? Postman and Weingartner (1969) provided a useful directive for this discussion. Their interpretation of “the medium as the message,” an idea formulated by Dewey and furthered by Marshall McLuhan, helps us see that myths perpetuate certain educational understandings, and further, what we can do to change this

pattern. “Dewey stressed that the role of an individual is assigned in an environment - what he is permitted to do - is what the individual learns. You learn them because your environment is organized in such a way that it permits or encourages or *insists* that you learn them” (Postman & Weingartner, 1969, p.17). The “medium” of an educational structure that prepares students for society as it is, exists as a clear “message” that education is automatically democratic since we live in a democracy.

With these understandings in mind, it seems apparent that in order to change the “message,” we need to reconstruct the “medium.” Such a redesign of social studies teacher education programs could begin by moving away from a frequent focus on content and transmitting understandings of citizenship as universal to students. Rather, social studies teacher education programs would prepare teacher candidates to engendering in their students the habits and skills to create the type of society and citizen that is more reflective of a realized democracy. Here purpose would serve as both the content and pedagogy of social studies teacher education (Hawley, 2012). Teacher educators would embrace equitable, communal, and active democratic orientations, opening opportunities for teacher candidates to develop as agents of change who model democratic living for their students. Within social studies teacher education programs operating from a reconstructionist perspective, teacher candidates will examine and deconstruct the myths of democracy they have experienced as students. Methods courses and field experiences would be structured around collaboratively developing teacher candidate’s ability to design and enact community action projects, promote and support inquiry learning and leveraging disciplinary knowledge to support efforts to create a more just and equitable society. Throughout teacher candidates will focus on creating spaces for their students to recognize bias, inequity, and to explore ways of addressing the ways society and education benefit some more than others. By giving students a chance to deconstruct myths, reorient society towards deep democracy, and providing them with teachers who model this approach, the individualistic, uncritical, and passive approach to social life may begin to unravel.

As teacher educators, we hope our work results in many more opportunities for student-citizens to learn to construct actively their own democratic futures. To make this a reality we hope to create a countermovement within the social studies world. Again, drawing on Ritchie (2012) we recognize how “social justice networks are important in the recruitment and retention of critical educators” (p. 127). Our goal is to (re)build and (re)energize the research and activist communities within the College and University Faculty Assembly (CUFA) and the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). Building on the momentum of the recently created Java Networks within CUFA, we support efforts aimed at leveraging shared interests across networks to support spaces for research, action and activism.

If the goal is truly to reframe and reshape practices in social studies teaching and teacher education, we must work together to create our own countermovement to sustain meaningful change. As part of building our countermovement, we suggest reaching out to established networks such as New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE), the Rouge Forum, the Chicagoland Researchers and Advocates for Transformative Education (CReATE), as well as the good people at Rethinking Schools and the Zinn Education Project. Together we can enabling a new generation of student-citizens to shape a future free of educational myths and full of wonder, questions, and active engagement.

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Authors

Todd S. Hawley is Associate Professor in the School of Teaching, Learning and Curriculum Studies at Kent State University.

Andrew L. Hostetler is Assistant Professor of the Practice of Social Studies Education, Department of Teaching and Learning at Peabody College at Vanderbilt University.

Evan Mooney is Adjunct Professor of Educational Foundations at Montclair State University.

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Theodorea Regina Berry, *U of Texas, San Antonio*
Amy Brown, *University of Pennsylvania*
Kristen Buras, *Georgia State University*
Paul R. Carr, *Université du Québec en Outaouais*
Lisa Cary, *Murdoch University*
Anthony J. Castro, *University of Missouri, Columbia*
Alexander Cuenca, *Saint Louis University*
Noah De Lissovoy, *The University of Texas, Austin*
Kent den Heyer, *University of Alberta*
Gustavo Fischman, *Arizona State University*
Stephen C. Fleury, *Le Moyne College*
Derek R. Ford, *Syracuse University*
Four Arrows, *Fielding Graduate University*
Melissa Freeman, *University of Georgia*
David Gabbard, *Boise State University*
Rich Gibson, *San Diego State University*
Rebecca Goldstein, *Montclair State University*
Julie Gorlewski, *SUNY at New Paltz*
Panayota Gounari, *UMass, Boston*
Sandy Grande, *Connecticut College*
Todd S. Hawley, *Kent State University*
Matt Hern, *Vancouver, Canada*
Dave Hill, *Anglia Ruskin University*
Nathalia E. Jaramillo, *University of Auckland*

Richard Kahn, *Antioch University Los Angeles*
Kathleen Kesson, *Long Island University*
Philip E. Kovacs, *University of Alabama, Huntsville*
Ravi Kumar, *South Asia University*
Saville Kushner, *University of Auckland*
Zeus Leonardo, *University of California, Berkeley*
John Lupinacci, *Washington State University*
Darren E. Lund, *University of Calgary*
Curry Stephenson Malott, *West Chester University*
Gregory Martin, *University of Technology, Sydney*
Rebecca Martusewicz, *Eastern Michigan University*
Cris Mayo, *University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign*
Peter Mayo, *University of Malta*
Peter McLaren, *University of California, Los Angeles*
João Paraskeva, *UMass, Dartmouth*
Jill A. Pnkney Pastrana, *U of Minnesota, Duluth*
Brad J. Porfilio, *California State University, East Bay*
Kenneth J. Saltman, *UMass, Dartmouth*
Doug Selwyn, *SUNY at Plattsburgh*
Özlem Sensoy, *Simon Fraser University*
Patrick Shannon, *Penn State University*
John Smyth, *University of Huddersfield*
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