Interview with Dr. Curry, Associate Professor Dept. Of Curriculum And Instruction, Warner School Of Education, University Of Rochester, NY.

A conversation between Mary Jane Curry and Fernando Marhuenda.

Interviewer: I am having a conversation with professor Mary Jane Curry from the Warner School of Education in the University of Rochester. You know Mary Jane that this interview is for a journal whose main audience is adult educators in Spain. So I would like to cover with you a few issues on education in general. Also because of the election and the changes, your views on that. Then, more specifically, I have seen a lot of work that you and people here are doing with refugees, with migrant people, welcoming them… So we'll talk a bit about that, both the young people as well as their families, when it comes to working relations as well. You also have a strong interest in unions and workers and citizens' rights, so also some views on what that means in terms of your own work. And then, finally, another section on your views on teaching English as a second language and what that means in a country like this and the demands, the challenges that you see, the advancements that you have found. It is a conversation, it is mainly free dialogue rather than an interview with questions and answers. So if you want to start by how you see the educational panorama in the country.

Dr. Curry: Well, I think the educational framework of the US right now, well, in a lot of ways is very analogous to the way our economy is going right now, which is very good quality for the top and very mediocre quality for everybody else and very bad quality for the most marginalized people. Partly, just talking about public school system from pre-kindergarten through high school, a lot of our funding mechanisms, as you probably know, come from property taxes, so if you live in a wealthy city or town or village, like Brighton [1], for example, where you're living, the property values are high, the taxes are robust because a lot of people are living there and they have expensive houses or good houses and the schools have a lot of money to work with, so the per capita spending on a student is sometimes double what we might spend on the urban…, two miles away. In contrast, the city of Rochester itself -because of the demise of Kodak [2]– is very poor, tax pay is very poor, there is a lot of unemployment, structural unemployment. The city is about 40% African-American, about 20% Latino and then there are, like in my neighborhood, mostly white people who have money, who have good jobs. This is

why I chose to live in the city, so that my taxes would contribute to the tax pays for the city, but I am one person, just one person. We do have some funding from the state, and there is also some funding at the federal level, the national level for specific programs. But in my opinion all of those are kind of like band-aid bandages trying to fill in the wound and the real, the real gap and where the blood is flowing is that the money stays with the rich people. And, I've seen so many other countries where, at a minimum, you have centralized funding mechanisms. And you have what we always have, the ideology here about level playing field is a joke, we don't have it.

So, in terms of the quality of education and the approaches and the pedagogy, any time you want to see where the good quality, pedagogies or approaches are you go to where the rich people are educating their children, right? It's the universal rule. And, you know, there are lots of great innovative pedagogies that happen in well resourced school districts, high quality teachers, teachers who don't leave, teachers who have extra training, teachers who have high quality education themselves and so. Well, people in this country don't understand what bad our education system is.

And when it comes to higher education it's pretty much the same thing, although it's a hard problem for people outside of our system to understand, for example are there clear divisions between public and private schools? No. Some of our best universities are public. Berkeley, Wisconsin, you know, even in New York State we have Buffalo, … We have very good public universities. In the past twenty years a lot of the funding for the public universities which came from the state government, which means came from taxes, a lot of that has been cut after the 9/11 2001 attacks, following the recession then but nothing as bad as the 2008 recession. And there's also now an ideology, like especially in Wisconsin, very ultraconservative legislators or not even conservative but really kind of radical libertarian or radical right, who basically see the academy as the enemy in terms when they don't fund it at all. They're completely ignorant of the kind of benefits that higher education and research bring to society, to the state, everything that we know, right?

And then we have all these private universities, like the University of Rochester is one of the top universities, and I'm still amazed sometimes at the quality of the students that come who don't know, I mean they can't write, they're, I mean some of the students that were in my class, their writing skills were so bad, and I just thought, how did you go through four years of undergraduate? And in some cases they already have a master's degree! My battle.

So there’s a lot of contradictions in our system. I think it really mirrors our economy and our values of economics before everything else. Except, in true understanding, if you really believed that economics came before everything else, you would prepare all your citizens to the best ability so people could contribute most fully. But that’s obviously not the priority

Interviewer: That’s very clear.

Dr. Curry: Do I sound like Michael Apple?

Interviewer: You sound like yourself very much. That’s great

Dr. Curry: I think about how much I was influenced by Michael Apple

Interviewer: I think I was, too, and, well, we enjoyed it there and there was sympathy towards that sort of points.

Dr. Curry: Everything he said has come true. And worse. He predicted everything!

Interviewer: However, from what you say, and from conversations we have had these months, my view is that, while, as an outsider, I would tend to think that the change in the presidency of the United States would have strong impact upon the school system, the good thing is that because of the lack of involvement of the central government into education that will not probably (be) the case, or is there still some fear?

Dr. Curry: Well, what’s interesting and, again, Michael Apple has seen the writing on the wall about this… The central government in this country has limited powers to tell the states how to do things. So, it can’t come, it hasn’t come in, ever, with the national curriculum, for example, and said everybody has to teach this.

But in the past ten years the standards movement, the national standards, which was really an initiative that was heavily funded by Bill Gates and supposedly liberal kind of guys, you know, this wealthy people. By creating national standards and then some of the textbook companies have created curricula, and some of the states have created curricula to match the standards. I’m actually not opposed to the standards because, in theory, as a hypothetical, this is a very good idea. We should be articulating what we want to teach and helping the students get there. The question is, how do we help students get there?

And that's where…, so we have the standards, but, well, we have had even before the No Child Left Behind [3] was, testing, testing test. So then what we've been working on since this No Child Left Behind which is 2000. In the testing regime, everything is inverted, because you're no longer teaching material, curriculum and then assessing it, you are teaching to the test. So much time was taken up in the schools, was taking tests, preparing for tests, and there's been all kinds of corruption of doling tests and, I mean, everything you can imagine, anything that could happen in some so called third world countries, has happened here. So unfortunately these external forces, like the tests and the standards and the test… in this state, until last year, there was also.

And this was part of a labor issue- teachers were evaluated, were being part of their annual evaluation and in raises, compensation, ranking, was being done, a big part of it was done on the performance of their students on the standardized tests that were aligned with the standards. So, to hold a teacher responsible for the performance of their students on standardized tests in a poor district that's predominantly minority English language learner, etc, is absurd, right? I mean, you cannot see one year of schooling in one child's life, in one class, connected to one teacher, and say that the teacher did x, y and z. Right? There's many, many factors out of the teacher's control, you know that: poverty, crime, game, missing parents, responsibility at home, hunger, homelessness, I mean, all of these things, not to mention a cultural and, well, strongly cultural mismatch between the curriculum and the pedagogy of the schools and the different cultures of many of our students including mainly African American but not only.

So, that at least in New York State, the governor kind of pulled this thing back from assessing teachers on the basis of their students' performance in a standardized test. I mean I don't necessarily have a problem with assessing teachers on the basis of their students' performance in their class, in their own assessments, right? You know, if you're a teacher and you give a project and none of your students pass it, and that's recorded somewhere, that IS a reflection of SOME part of your teaching, right? You know, but not, it's ridiculous,…

So my view, it's so interesting when you think about it, because twenty years ago I felt like, how can you make a difference in the world if you can help to improve the quality of education in our country? And you just look at what happened in that time period since I started my PhD and our hopes have just been infiltrated, commercialized, capitalized, every drop of profit that can be taken out of it has been taken out of it, and that's continuing and that is something that of course

Apple was talking about twenty years ago in terms of the chartered schools. You know, Trump's nominee for the Secretary of Education, Betsy De Vos [4], is a woman who has zero education experience, but she has spent millions, if not billions, of dollars advocating for chartered schools [5] in Michigan, where they have a very poor track record. There's nowhere in this country that chartered schools outperform public schools on a regular basis.

So, it's just very demoralizing, I think, to see that education used to be in a way perceived as the engine of social change, and upper mobility. You know, you look at all the stories of anybody from Horatio Alger [6] to any veteran who came back from WWII and got to go to college under the G.I. bill [7] and their father was a butcher and they became a lawyer or a professor or whatever. I mean there is this generational shift right after WWII when the people came back and the government was paying for them to go to college. And certainly all these people could go to college. And it made a huge difference in their lives and to our economy. But the idea that education is a kind of force for good now I think has really come under question because it's just, it's become a tool of capitalists and it's really almost going back to…, people talked about this in the sixties, about education as kind of a holding tank in kinds of unemployment, you know as to keep people out of the labor market.

Interviewer: In Spain there is this talk in the past years that we have the best prepared generation ever, in terms of people whose grandparents were illiterate, never went to school and went a couple of years and that was it. And now these people have been able, with a lot of effort on the part of the family, also on the part of the state providing education, to attend higher education and yet most of these young people are going away from the country because they don't have any chances there. In a way, what you say reminds me of what, we have also very good, educated people and country and yet if you look like, things like at the results of the elections or the involvement of the country in wars in different parts of the world, like there is this disconnection between the education, the culture of people and then the performance of citizens, or the behavior that we as a society show.

Dr. Curry: But I also think that, even your ordinary student from let's say, not Brighton because that's a very upper middle class town, but let's say further East, like Walworth, the town where Moritz [8] was raising his family. You can have a kid graduate from high school and go to let's say State University of New York at Brockport, which is right off the road here, which is very low, very mediocre. That student has probably never been challenged in her entire life to think critically in

any way you wanted to find critical thinking, whether it's analytic thinking, where people can confront higher order thinking skills or whether it's actual critical, political thinking. They cannot do either one. And I see it, because sometimes I get people who went to Brockport, undergraduates, who come to do their Master's degree with me and it's just like, they got nothing. They do not put a paragraph together; they cannot make an argument; they can only do what they're told; ….

Interviewer: They have been education consumers….

Dr. Curry: They have been consumers, they have been low, they've been obedient, they perform, they've been well trained, they are well behaved workers. Like what McLaren talks about. So what I basically find is, among white people, is that the upper middle class who are provided with the opportunity to have upper education, some people get a critical education alongside that and others don't; probably depends on who your family is. Or maybe if you had particular opportunities in university or high school even. Of course we have critical, oppressed people here, you know, African Americans, I mean that, you know, there's a very strong critical faculty as you know, among people who are oppressed. They don't have any blinders about what is going on. So, in terms of thinking about how is anything ever going to change, this is very depressing. And Obama is an interesting case because A, he was centrist, so he didn't come in as a radical; B, he instantly elicited a huge rate of backlash that never stopped. The congress itself was calling him a liar in the first three months -I think it was the first, not the first three months, the first, the first state of the union address I think there was a white congressman that called out during the state of the Union address "liar". It's outrageous. And of course congress became completely obstructionist. So he couldn't get, he got a lot through that he wanted to, but he couldn't get as much done as he should have been able to and if he had been white, probably would have got a lot more done. So he provided a fantastic role model, he was hugely exciting for many of us, it felt like a huge stimulant change and he as a thinker and as a lawyer and as a community activist and a very rational down to earth person, reasonable. It seemed like he's not, he's not a Malcolm X, he's not going to go in there and raise a black power salute and, you know, fire people up. But he even as the most polite, respectful, open minded… They didn't want to have anything to do with him. So it was, from that perspective, very disappointing and very idle to me.

Interviewer: That brings us to the, an issue I have experienced here I was not aware of while I was in Madison, Wisconsin twenty years ago, and that's the issue of segregation and how strongly I have seen that in terms of neighborhoods, housing,

schools, politics as well. How do you see the development of that process along our history, as long as you have memory in the US because while I was here I was attending a lecture and they were saying that the anti-segregation developed between the 1960s and into the early 1990s and since then there has been backwards movement, a re-segregation process and how, for your background, with McLaren, I mean, most of these Freirean people, very politically conscious people in the field of education… your social and union engagement as well. How do you assess that situation or that development in the country? Also in terms of the people that now will be in their 60s, 70s and who had hope at some stage in their youth and they saw the development and now perhaps a decline.

Dr. Curry: Well, here's the thing. Segregation at its base has to do with housing. And in this country we've always had as in many countries, a strong foundation of neighborhood schools. So as long as you have neighborhood schools in segregated neighborhoods you will continue to have school segregation. So in the 1970s we had a big movement towards busing, which often meant busing African American children into white neighborhoods but sometimes the other way and there was a huge backlash about that. I mean there's this great book by Anthony Lucas [9], about the Boston busing, hugely resistant to segregation and there were all kinds of racist attacks, but it wasn't just Boston, this kind of things happens everywhere. I mean the big message that the North is not as resistant and rebellious itself is absolutely not true. There, actually today on the public radio there was a show about a social studies teacher here who's teaching about how the banks -do you know the term "red lining"? The banks basically drew a red line around certain neighborhoods and in those neighborhoods they reduced, they restricted the availability of mortgages, they gave higher interest rates.

So basically housing segregation was structurally supported by these racist banking practices. In addition to, after the war, the migration of people, African Americans into sort of white neighborhoods which was met with all kinds of physical resistance and then whites started moving to the suburbs and so we have what we call white clouds. So Rochester is a classic example of sometimes what we call the doughnut city, where the core that used to be predominantly white, which had these beautiful houses and in this case worked at Kodak and other industries in the city, very prosperous, very strong, working and middle, and upper-middle class, all, all levels, there was work for everybody. There were African American employees, but they were always treated worse. But they did have top jobs, they did have jobs, many factory jobs. So in the 50s in Rochester was one of the early cities for this to

happen. In 1954 there were race riots in Rochester. Partially over the treatment African Americans were receiving in, at Kodak. And if they're given the term race riots is interesting because I use that without thinking about it but it seems to have a negative connotation. Some people would say, 1964 there were protests, right? I find funny this labeling thing. So segregation obviously goes back to slavery, it goes back to, and it wasn't just against African Americans, but I mean, when different immigrant groups came people have always had to make their way etc., but white immigrant groups eventually have basically assimilated, right? We have an Italian governor, you know, the Irish, the Italians, any group used to be considered, in some cases they're even coal black but they definitely considered undesirable and eventually they assimilated. And with African Americans, between the legacy of slavery and the skin color that has never happened. I assume it never happened. It only happened in a certain stratum.

You can't really talk about school segregation or desegregation if you don't address the question of housing because until (I mean this neighborhood is 97% white, I mean Moritz's neighborhood is much more integrated) you just have that problem. You're not going to have, people don't like to bus their children to other neighborhoods. The neighborhoods don't like children coming from other places. And then you're forcing the children to do the work of integrating, racial integration that the adults can't do. And so it doesn't work. In fact, African Americans had better education in many cases under segregation because they had African American teachers and they had strong community, cultural, connections between their home and the school. That was all broken with segregation, with desegregation. A strange irony there.

Interviewer: Very well. Let's move out of that depressing zone we were talking about. One thing I've been amazed at while we've been here these months is the way in which this country or this New York state or this town of Rochester acts and welcomes refugees and migrant people without advertising it or saying it out loud. so well, while the stories I hear from like Australia is tragic. And Europe has a lot of blah, blah, blah and yet the way it's reacting and Spain has done almost nothing there.

Dr. Curry: We're not on the front line. We're not on the front line. So, the refugees who've come here are resettled here by the UNHCR, through the US State Department. We are accepting a very small number compared to Europe, Australia, Canada. I mean. You know, you see different things and we do accept a lot, high number of refugees, but I think we're very selective about what countries they

come from. So right now there is a political anti-Muslim sentiment. We are getting more Syrian refugees here, but nothing like the numbers that we should be getting.

Interviewer: But however, what I have seen for instance in the Rochester International Academy, the effort of having a school that is working, serving them, a short time, two years and then putting them into ordinary schools. That is amazing.

Dr. Curry: It's an amazing school. And I mean it. Well, there was a woman, a very visionary woman who is now the head of ESL for Burlington, Vermont. And this is not just a coincidence. Her sister is friends with my sister Liz in Burlington and when I came here my sister said "oh, this woman, Miriam, you know, I know her sister and she works in ESL in Rochester" so, and I knew I would have met her anyhow, but we had this connection. And she was a very strong advocate and very outspoken and she was passed over from being appointed. They had this ESL in the RCSD. And now that's a crime. So, she was still working in the city but not as the Head she should have been, and they hired this guy who knew nothing about it at all. He was a foreign language guy from Long Island. It was a very political page in this kind of story. So my sister emailed me and said Burlington has either created or has an opening as director of ESL. So I told Miriam. She got the job. She was gone. So, it's an interesting case because Burlington also has done a lot for refugees. Miriam was instrumental in setting up RIA and if she were still here you would have seen her there, like I'm on the advisory board. But she really was working closely. She went to visit other refugee kinds of school in, like North Carolina and other parts of the country. And then the principal has just decades of experience and political capital in the RCSD. She had no prior experience with refugees or with ESOL, at all. But she is just a very determined person. You can, you met her, right? Yeah. And she's fallen a lot of times, but she's been very successful, and she's also had a lot of support from the Catholic Families Center, which is the refugee resettlement agency as well as the administrators in the city who are responsible for placing students in different schools. So, basically, RIA is now in its sixth year and growing. And there are like three hundred something students and…

But yet, this is only, I think, ten percent of the ELLs in the RCSD. So where I think my, kind of critical assessment of the refugee response, even though I'm completely supportive of it, and I think we have a moral and ethical obligation, a political obligation to take care of refugees… Refugees are like the "feel good" ESL population. Because they came here, they're innocent, they're like the innocents, right? They're not illegal, they're not, they're not crossing the border, they're not crossing the Rio Grande, they are coming in, and they're not given enough

resources. They have to repay their things there. It’s outrageous. And they have like six months of support and they’re kind of anonymous not, it’s not a lot.

But if you think about, compared with what we sometimes called long term ESL students, or like for example Puertoricans who are US citizens and they can go back and forth to Puerto Rico all the time, they don’t get nearly the kind of support they should get because, for one, their situation is so complicated. But also, you know, the refugees like you saw, the kids at RIA, they’ve witnessed all kinds of traumatic situations, they’ve had to flee their country, all these horrible things. But they get here. They’re so grateful. They’re so determined. They’re so hard working. They’re so motivated. They exhibit the kind of behaviors that make people happy to help them. They’re good students. You know, when I took, was it, the day that I took you and Moritz, to visit Corey’s class and Corey leaves the room for five minutes and the students are working, working, working? Well that’s not what is happening in most other schools, in some suburb schools. That does not even going to happen in Brighton, right? So you have this, like, this little angel and I don’t mean anything negative to it but I think it’s important to recognize that on the ground we are already treating differently, different groups of learners. Partially because of how they respond to our kind of do good effort, like our beneficent efforts. And they reward themselves and us by being successful. Within two years some, not all, by any means, but some of those students are already passing the state required tests that they have to take to graduate from high school. Mostly not the ones who had so much education at home like in Nepal and places like that.

But it occurs to me after a while, you know everybody loves to talk about refugees. 75% of the ELL in this country are Spanish speakers. They’re Puertoricans, they’re Dominicans, they’re Mexicans, they’re Central Americans. Born, they’re born in the US. They’re what we call generation 1.5. That, you know, we have in multiple places. Look, California, New Mexico, Arizona, that was Mexico. We took it. They were here first, right? So, you know, those political situations are so complicated and the cultural tensions between these groups, you know these people who for decades were told not to speak Spanish in school. Now we know that, I mean, getting to your pedagogy question then. You always want to support students’ home languages in education. You don’t want to eradicate them. But for generations they were told: “Act like native Americans. You can only speak English here”, right? And, you know? The US does not have an official language, not one.

Interviewer: Uh, uh? Not even English?

Dr. Curry: No, zero, nada. So people say “Oh, you’re an American, speak English.” Well, they should say “Oh, you’re an American, speak Iroquois or you know, Turkish, or something, because those are their native languages.

So there’s a lot of misconceptions about what happens here and unfortunately it’s never a clean,…Like I mean anywhere. There’s never a clear strategy… The mythology, the ideology is always wrong. Right? So I do agree that’s what happens. Like I was reading in the NYT an opinion on an essay that a woman had written about adopting a refugee family. I think it was in Georgia, they were from Syria, not speaking any Arabic and learning two phrases; and you know about how she benefited… It’s these stories, these feel-good stories about like in the end I benefited more than they did, you know, this kind of things. And it makes you really want to get involved and to help and to create this connection. I mean there’s nothing wrong with it but it’s the same, I mean, the general critique of this kind of liberal helping impulse is, like, the one to one makes you feel good but it doesn’t actually address the larger structural issue, right? Which is why does our government -and it’s going to get worse under Trump- not bring more refugees here, right? Why is our, why our school system’s so bad that, so bad at supporting ELLs that most subject teachers don’t have one idea about how to work with somebody who’s different from them. Cause you are catching me in a very negative mood, realistic.

Interviewer: Very well, very well. I’m not the most optimistic fellow either. We have come now to the core of your main area which is ESL and how people deal with that. I understand what schools do with children, young people. But then, what about their families, the adults with them? These months you have said sometimes that it’s the children who assist the parents with doctors or with … What sort of support or system do you have to help adults learn English and to make them more, in a way, mainstream, more integrated into society?

Dr. Curry: Not much. So, like…

Interviewer: Not even at the community level? Because in this country communities can get involved in very powerful ways.

Dr. Curry: Well, again, there’s these efforts that people make that are usually very well intentioned and they are ill informed, they don’t really know what they’re doing. Ah. Ok, so we have some adult education classes for immigrant adults. Some of this is offered through the Public Library by volunteers. So the librarians don’t

know anything about teaching English and the volunteers don't know anything about teaching English. And the refugees and immigrants are usually pretty low educated in their home country and often may be not even literate in their own language because maybe their language just didn't have a written form or they were forced to leave school, I mean, for all the reasons the people, or refugees they are often not well educated. So, you'd go to something, like Saturday morning ESL school. And you have worksheets, you have memorizing formulaic language, you have learning the words for ice skates and golf clubs and candy cane. And the students are grateful and polite and don't basically say, you know, what they really need. One of the videos, DVDs that I lent you guys is called *Nickel City Smiler* [10]. Did you watch them? It's about the refugees who live in Buffalo. You've got to watch it…. So, we have adult education. In Buffalo Center for adult education. I haven't been to the one in Rochester but from what I've heard it's not very good. This typically adult education uses very old pedagogy, teaches English through grammar and…

My dissertation was about this in a city in the Midwest where, basically, the curriculum and the teaching and the students didn't match up at all, and that's very common. So, ok, let's say an immigrant or a refugee comes and they already have a high school diploma. They can go to the community college. And they have ESL classes there, also. And they probably even have some pre-diploma people, non-credit. And they can. The quality is not very good.

So a lot of what happens with adults, immigrant and refugee education is informal learning through their own social networks. So a lot of people just get stuck where they are, because they can't really learn enough English. And then of course the other thing you have is people are working all the time. And, like, when I worked in Boston I taught adults in Boston, there was a waiting list of three years to get English classes and I don't think that that has changed much and I doubt that it's different in a lot of places because, who wants to pay for this? Right? It's paid by government grants or whatever. Or you haven't taught volunteers that work but when you are going to, …

Ok, when I was learning Spanish, of course I was already pretty fluent in French and I studied, Latin and Greek and all that. Ok, I said before I went to Costa Rica the first time on vacation I did a six-week adult education like two nights a week, fun, fun, fun. You know, you learn this much. I went to live in Costa Rica for six months. I mean I didn't go for six months; I went to live in Costa Rica with three thousand dollars and I stayed for six months. I lived with a family I didn't have to tell them not

to speak English to me. I woke up every morning and I read the newspaper with a dictionary: I spent about two hours reading the newspaper with a dictionary looking up the words I didn't know. I listened to the radio, I spoke Spanish to my students except when I was teaching. And I already had a master's degree. You know, and I taught myself a ton of Spanish and I was in the environment.

Well that's not an immigrant's situation. So that's an immersion study abroad situation and not a traditional student but it's immersion in the best way. So most immigrants are here, they're with their families or people that are from their country. They're in a neighborhood or social network where everybody speaks in the same language and they don't have a lot of opportunities to interact with native English speakers, with any English speaker. And what they're offered as classes are let's just say very superficial and not very efficient pedagogically speaking. So, I m not sure this is true in Spanish for foreigners in Spain, for French in Montreal, you know it's hard to learn a language when you're not in an immersion situation, it's hard to learn a language as an adult, unless you have this hugely privileged situation like I had, right? Not a lot of people can take six months off of their lives and go live with a family in other country as a 32-year-old, right? It's like an extended vacation basically.

Interviewer: No, you're right. I mean, looking at our own experience, … Macarena has learned hard, she was immersed, she was in need of learning the language. On the other side, Esperanza was saying yesterday that she missed, she has lost opportunities to get more engaged and to learn more English and she was not so confident of her English any more. And then, well we had this, that was yesterday morning when we went to this potluck at Mrs. Hallagan's [11] and we met there this couple of Spanish people, Cuban people who are living here, have lived here for the past four, six years, worked here and you could hear their English and I said: well, mine is not the best, but if I compare to these people who lived here and use it on a daily basis I am pretty happy about it, not that I cannot learn a lot more, and that's the experience we have there. That's right, I mean, what you mean about the environment and ….

Dr. Curry: But I think also, there's, like my experience in Chile made me really question my ability to speak Spanish because you're in a new environment where like the Chilean variety of Spanish was very different every day, but also I was living alone, I was on the Internet all the time, I was skyping with Moritz everyday, I was watching Netflix, I was doing email, … and I was in an English language department so I didn't really even need to use Spanish in the university. I have one friend, I've

kept good friends with her and her husband there. If we went out and I said *¿hablamos en español?* and she would say *ok*. Or she would say *¿hablamos en español?* But, otherwise, so, but, you know, it's, I think, the more you know about the language, the more you realize, like, "oh I have a lot more I could learn".

But yeah, I just think this, the country and the state and the public school system are moving more to acknowledging that across this country ten percent of our students are ELLs. And of course that's not evenly distributed. So in Rochester about ten percent of the public school students are ELLs. But in Boston, New York, LA, San Francisco, it would be much higher. In, you know, Nebraska, Wisconsin, it would probably be lower. So that number's not going to go down. It's only going to go up.

So take the State, this, New York State, as of, a year ago, September, has changed the regulations for schools to improve the way that they support ELLs. So as a kind of follow-up from that our teacher education program we are now starting to require all teachers to take one course in teaching ELLs. So after they learn how to teach their content area, then they have an additional course that is basically how do they make that content available and pedagogy available to their students. So hopefully, you know, in a few years we'll have more teachers who are more familiar.

But listen to this, even somebody who wants to be an ESL teacher here, like the students who are in the class with me and Esperanza, they're only required to have studied a foreign language for twelve credits. So that's like four semesters. Which is nothing. Right? They don't have to, really have a strong proficiency in another language, they don't have to have any real experience living in another culture. So, you know, they don't necessarily understand the experience of their students, and they also don't necessarily have a strong foundation in linguistics or grammar, we do what we can.

Interviewer: So, in a way you have covered most of the challenges in the field of ESL which is main focus area for you but also for the integration of people in the system in society. What would you see as the main trends in the development that you have seen in the past 20 years, 30 years in ESL in this country?

Dr. Curry: Well, I think in the school arena the main strength is the shift from focusing on teaching language as grammar to teaching language by teaching the content, language through content, what we call it Content Based Language Instruction (CBLI), which basically means, and it's also a kind of principle that ESL

students cannot wait really five to seven years to get total equivalent proficiency in academic English compared to their native English speaking peers, which of course will never happen because those peers are growing on their own. But, what, the old version was ‘let’s put them in ESL for a couple of years and then put them in the mainstream’. But during that time they’re missing other content, plus they’re already missing -unless they’re very young- they’re probably already missing some content in terms of, compared with their peers of the same age.

So I think the move towards CBLI, which still has a long way to go, and now there’s these new regulations in NYS that will help all teachers understand the challenges that ESL students are facing and the ways that they can support them and make their content more accessible. In an ideal world we could really see some fantastic things. What will happen in reality will be very similar to what already happens, which is the rich districts will do well. I mean, a student like Macarena, who comes from an educated family, can come in, learn a time, even if you have someone -I’m sure she has classmates who are permanent immigrants but if they can live in Brighton that means their family probably has some resources.

Interviewer: Very well. Let’s move to a different issue, how do you see teachers in this country, their training, their commitment, the recognition they get from society, the struggles they have to face, being a teacher educator…

Dr. Curry: Well, I think it’s very much how it’s been for the past let’s say at least 60 years, 65 years or more, which is elementary school teachers are predominantly women and predominantly middle to lower middle class. In many cases they don’t have a lot of other options for their own careers. They’re not the best students, they’re good girls, usually women, and it’s very much a caretaker model of teaching. Then in the secondary schools you have more men because there are the content areas and you have greater variety, probably, of quality.

I think, ESL is this field that I was certainly attracted to and I think that many of my students are attracted to as a way of being more politically engaged and actively involved. Unfortunately, I think the machinery of the education at school makes it very challenging for students to keep that kind of critical edge or advocacy edge because they, we, in this State teachers can get tenure after three years of teaching. And it’s tenure, it’s permanent. So for their first three years they have very strong incentives not to rock the boat, not to challenge anything and just to go along with the system. What we know from tenure in any level is that once you start out in a certain way they shape how the system is pressuring me to act. It’s, you

don’t necessarily change later.

That’s not true for everybody. There are teachers who once they have tenure they feel more free to challenge things. But special education, ESL, very much marginalized areas, you know as the service areas, they’re not even considered content areas. It’s interesting that in NYS teachers get certified for all in K-12; they don’t have a secondary or elementary specialization. So, obviously, this kind of ideology that it doesn’t really matter, they go just there to kind of help students learn the language and there’s no sense in that ideology that the language is anything more than the grammar.

So I think teachers, it’s very clear that teachers in this society are not highly valued, they’re not, they don’t have a lot of autonomy, they are now more and more controlled by these tests, even if they’re not directly assessed on the student performance there are more tests of the teachers themselves, which again is not always a bad thing, because, you know, teachers who can’t have the tests at their own content area, in my opinion, should not be teaching that content area, if the test is valid, right?, which we don’t really know, I mean, I don’t know. People probably have different views on this. I remember when Massachusetts brought in teacher tests about maybe, well, probably around 20 years ago, a lot of existing teachers did not have the content test of their own content area, yeah.

Interviewer: Massachusetts, which probably is one of the best educated States.

Dr. Curry: Exactly. Exactly. That was a shock for a lot of people. You know, social studies, science, etcetera. You know, some of this also has to do with what you believe about the structure of teacher preparation. So we have in this country undergraduate teacher certification programs where students are majoring in education plus a content area. Well, if you’re majoring in education, let’s say you have a third or a half of your university credits in education, whatever that means, you’re not getting a strong liberal arts education, you’re not getting maybe the depth of content you might get otherwise.

I have always been in favor of the graduate model of teacher education, which is what we have at Warner, where you have a major as an undergraduate and then you learn how to teach. And I think it produces better teachers. And you have a bunch of very good teachers who have gone to schools like another of this SUNY School, Geneseo, which is about 30 miles out of here, you probably saw it, which is an excellent school, produces excellent teachers, excellent students.

So I have many students who did their undergraduate teaching degrees in elementary or Spanish or special education or social studies and they come to me and they get a Master's degree and their certification of education and they are fantastic. But some students I had tell me "oh, nobody ever asked me to do that, a lesson plan or I had to justify how the assessment was going to be addressed by the activity or something, you know, I mean, some, the rigor that we are requiring of them, that I require of them, I think most of my colleagues demand this as well. They, we never ask to perform at all, they never had to think it through, right?. So they don't have any sense of, like, I mean I always say in my classes, you know, these kids have no time to waste. ESOL students have no time to waste. You are wasting their time if you're not teaching them. You can be as nice with them as you want, you are wasting their time. Now like: "oh, what?" You know? We can think that's true for all of our students, our students have no time to waste. And they even, students waste teachers' time and teachers waste students' time, everybody goes bum, bum, bum, move on to the next grade and you're all happy. You don't know about their knowledge.

Interviewer: Well, we have moved from a more negative issue to valuable things as well as the efforts and the strength and good things around there. Thank you very much for sharing a few views with us.

Dr. Curry: My pleasure.

Interviewer: And if you want to add anything else or to…

Dr. Curry: Well I think the only other thing we should clarify is because, you know, you're from Spain and I've done a lot of international work. It's just, this country's really powerful intrinsic isolationism. Even if we don't have an official policy of isolationism, which we may be moving towards with Trump, we have an intrinsic cultural isolationism in a global sense, although we are internally diverse, especially compared to a lot of countries, that is not a mindset, that is not a value that most Americans who are not highly educated would share. You know, upper middle classes who have traveled, and they know people from other countries and they've studied other languages and whatever. That's like, that's like, let's say 10% of the country at most. It's the ten per cent that is controlling the media and higher education and government at the national level. But, you know, it's not your ordinary, like my friend Sandy who I know from walking our dogs, her husband was a postal worker, she retired as a pharmacist's assistant, she graduated from high school. Barely. I mean I know her barely in terms of her grades, but I mean If you

talk with her, she knows very little about the world. And then, where people get their news, where people, how people think about things. If we meet, there's a Polish woman who walks her dogs out there who has an accent. She's a graduate student. She has, you know, an accent, I have no trouble understanding her of course. Sandy cannot understand a word she says. And this is something that students tell me all the time. It's, they say, why can, why can, you can understand me but when I go out this is the world nobody can understand me. Because I have an ear from people speaking English differently but also I have the willingness to come to terms, willingness to communicate, or willingness to engage, basically, to say like, communication is a two-way street. It's not just that you have to speak English to a point where I can understand you. I have to be willing to listen, assume that you're saying something that makes sense and help us work to understanding it. And that takes effort and energy and I don't always have it and other people don't always have it but you have to have a, start somewhere, right? So I think that the unfortunate thing about Trump is that we are going to become more isolationist, we're going to close the borders to the extent possible and we're going to disengage from the global stage. But not in the ways that would be useful, which would be militarily. But check back in four years, we must see if he's still here.

Interviewer: I'll try to.

Dr. Curry: Hopefully before that.

Interviewer: Thank you very much.

Dr. Curry: Ok. That was fun. I'd be very interested. So is this going to be, this interview is going to be used in English or translated or…?

Interviewer: I will translate it. The journal is written in Catalan….

Notes

[1] One of Rochester suburbs, NY.

[2] The photo industry had always its headquarters in Rochester, NY

[3] A law promoted by President George W. Bush to improve education in the US.

[4] Currently, Trump’s Secretary of Education.

[5] Public schools that have been privatized, in a process initiated in the mid 1990s..eacher in a secondary school, known to both Dr. Curry and the interviewere iron belt in the US.

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[6] Author of many books supporting the myth of the middle American, able to make himself upon effort and sacrifice.

[7] A law approved in 1944 in order to facilitate reentry into civil society of soldiers coming back after WWII.

[8] A friend of Dr. Curry also known to the interviewer.

[9] Journalist and Pulitzer winner, known by his work *Common Ground*, on racial relations in Boston, Massachusetts, and the problems of school transport.

[10] A documentary upon the fight for survival of a group of Burma people in the iron belt in the US.

[11] An ESL teacher in a secondary school, known to both Dr. Curry and the interviewer.