Curriculum Defined and Represented: A Pre-Service Teacher's Perspective

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Abstract

This Honors Thesis explores approaches to curriculum development and enactment, the role of the teacher in the curriculum development process, and the sociocultural influences that cause teachers to adapt their processes to prioritize students' needs, describing the implications of my findings for preservice teachers. Findings show that curriculum is complex and broad in nature. Experts' definitions of curriculum vary and so do their preferred approaches to curriculum design. These differences can be attributed to their respective belief systems regarding teaching and learning. The role of the teacher is to develop a symbiotic relationship between the curriculum requirements designated by their school or district and their own belief systems and pedagogical preferences. Though the roles of the teacher and administration are vital to successful curriculum development and implementation, students and their differing sociocultural backgrounds greatly influence how teachers make decisions regarding their curriculum design and enactment. Preservice teachers need to understand the specifics of the curriculum development process, recognizing the complexities and fully embracing their role as a teacher by taking an active role in designing and enacting curriculum in the classroom.

Introduction

Curriculum is defined and represented differently depending upon the source, both in the scholarly literature and in practice. As a preservice teacher, these inconsistencies have left me confused and curious. The term curriculum is used often in readings and classes, often without a clear definition or explanation. It is obviously important and central to the field of teaching. In my program of study, there is an entire class devoted to learning about curriculum design. However, even after completing that class, a clear meaning of the term still evades me. Obviously, the idea is complex and the term is used in myriad ways and for varied purposes throughout the field of education and society at large. I have continued to wonder, "what does "curriculum" mean?" "Does it have a universal meaning or does it change depending upon context?" "How will curriculum impact my teaching life and what will my role be in the development and enactment of curriculum?" These questions have been the driving force of my research. As I look to my first year of teaching, I need to be able to understand this complex concept and how it positions me and my students. Therefore, I have scoured scholarly sources for information regarding curriculum development, definition, and enactment in hopes that I might answer the following questions: "How is curriculum defined and represented?" and "What is the role of teachers in the development and implementation of curriculum?"

Process & Methodologies

My initial plan for this study was to conduct online interviews with current first-year teachers about their understandings of curriculum and how curriculum affects their teaching lives. As the initial phase of the study, I completed a review of the literature to depend on my

understandings about the experts' point of views. I had hoped to follow up with conducting the interviews but, unfortunately, issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic complicated my plans and required a change of course. I determined instead to expand my analysis of the literature, addressing the common themes in the works I have read and reflecting upon my own experiences as a pre-service practitioner to offer a perspective on the implications for pre-service teachers.

First, I developed my research questions with my thesis director. Simultaneously, I worked with my curriculum design course instructor to find prominent readings in the field that would be appropriate to use for my literature review regarding preservice teachers. These sources of literature are used in a collegiate course designed to prepare preservice teachers for their experiences in the classroom designing and enacting curriculum. I completed my literature review, synthesizing the key concepts and claims regarding curriculum for each piece of literature.

To expand upon my analysis of the literature for my honors thesis project, I examined my literature review with the intention of identifying the primary themes addressed in each piece of literature. Once I had established the primary themes, I rearranged my literature review, organizing my thoughts by theme rather than by piece of literature. In doing so, I was able to discuss the similarities and differences between the authors' works as my findings and ascertain the implications of these findings for pre-service teachers.

Findings

Curriculum is complex and broad in nature. My analysis of core scholarly sources related to curriculum revealed the following themes: 1) approaches to curriculum design vary and each

approach reflects a particular understanding about teaching and learning; 2) schooling structures and processes influence how curricula are developed and implemented; and 3) sociocultural issues greatly influence the curriculum development process, implementation and learning. I discuss each of these findings below, then consider implications for my role as a first-year teacher.

I.   Approaches to Design

Approaches to curriculum design vary and each approach reflects a particular understanding about teaching and learning. These approaches can be broken up into the following: the *backward design* approach and the *six different entry points* within *backward design* (Wiggins and McTighe, 2008), *using data process of collaborative inquiry* (Love, 2009) , and *ability-based differentiation techniques* (Missett, Bruner, Callahan, Moon, and Azano, 2014).

Wiggins and McTighe (2008) articulate and describe the Backward Design process in curriculum. "Teachers are designers" and "an essential act of [teacher's] profession is the design of curriculum and learning experiences" in order to fulfill certain purposes (p. 1). Wiggins and McTighe define curriculum as the learning experiences students take part in to meet specified purposes. They relate teachers in their professions to architects, both designers in their own right. Teachers design their curriculum (learning experiences), assessments and instruction; architects design structures and aesthetics. Both a teacher's and architect's design processes require an end result already in mind before any other work can commence. The Backward Design process

begins with identifying the desired results or outcomes first, determining acceptable evidence second, and finally, planning learning experiences (curriculum) and instruction (p. 3).

Wiggins and McTighe (2008) also share the "six common entry points and general approaches to the design process" that all account for variances in content, nature of learners, available time, and personal style (p. 256). These six entry points include beginning with the content standards, considering desired-real world applications, utilizing a key resource or favorite activity, an important skill, a key assessment or an existing unit. Using the Backward Design approach, teachers can begin their curriculum development process by focusing on one of those six entry points and adapting their plans in order to improve the existing design. Backwards Design continually requires teachers to reform and improve their methods, thus, making new ones in the process.

While Wiggins and McTighe's approach to curriculum is focused on beginning with the end goal in mind, Love (2009) sees data as the starting point for curriculum decisions. Additionally, she sees "raising awareness of cultural proficiency" (p. 4) as the most critical guide for decision-making, as data without context is insufficient for understanding the needs of learners.

Love (2009) articulates five stages of curriculum development for envisioning a detailed future for the school, including intervention and instruction. She states that data teams responsible for overseeing the curriculum development process must be assembled first in order to build a strong foundation. Once data teams have been created, they are responsible for examining multiple sources of student-learning data in order to identify a specific area in which students need to improve. They consider all gaps in understanding as indicated by the data, select

one to focus on, and set a student learning goal driven by the data they have analyzed. The data teams work towards verifying the causes of the issue they have identified by comparing their personal data with local data about school and classroom practices. This process leads data teams to generate potential solutions to enact and monitor results (Love, 2009). They analyze the data from the changes in order to learn what adjustments should be made or if the desired outcomes were met. After data teams have collaborated through these steps, they can begin identifying student needs and appropriate instructional designs and processes.

Similar in many ways to previous approaches to curriculum, Missett, Bruner, Callahan, Moon, and Azano (2014) emphasize the importance of differentiated instruction and curriculum to meet the needs of each student rather than opting for a one-size-fits-all approach that often leaves students with gaps in their understanding. They suggest the approach of monitoring students in order to differentiate curriculum and instruction for gifted students through accelerated practices, ability grouping (grouping based upon similar strengths and talents), and formative assessments (p. 246-250).

These three culminating approaches to curriculum design indicate that different entities' understandings about teaching and learning affect the way in which they approach curriculum design and implementation. While experts such as Wiggins and McTighe advocate for an approach that starts with an end result in mind, other experts such as Love support a data-driven approach that emphasizes the importance of reflecting upon prior student data in order to understand students' needs. And still others like Missett et. al prefer a more individualized approach to curriculum development. These differences designate curriculum development to be highly dependent upon one's own pedagogical beliefs.

II.   The Role of the Teacher in Curriculum

Schooling structures and processes influence how curricula are developed and implemented. Different stakeholders may have varying views of what curriculum is and how it should be implemented. The role of the teacher from school to school and district to district influences how curriculum is defined and enacted.

Wiggins and McTighe (2008) portray curriculum as something that teachers have substantial control over as a result of how they choose to define curriculum. When curriculum is defined as the learning experiences prepared by teachers for students, teachers can be more involved in their planning.

Similarly to Wiggins and McTighe, Peck (2010) describes a situation in which changes to the curriculum at a certain elementary school provided teachers the opportunity to be more active in the curriculum development and implementation process. She documents "the change process that led one elementary school from being marginal to one of the highest achieving schools in a large, urban district" (p. 394). Both administrators and teachers at Quest, a large elementary school in the Northeast in the midst of a high poverty area, made the decision to move from textbook-based instruction to inquiry-based curriculum, which allowed for teachers to fit their curriculum to the needs, interests, and lives of their students. This is an example of a collaborative approach to curriculum design on behalf of both the administration and teachers. Before, students had to fit into the curriculum set by the textbook, but now teachers had the ability to evolve their curriculum to fit the academic needs of their students. Teachers aligned all curriculum with the local and state standards and assessments, placing literacy at the center of

their instruction in all areas (p. 397-398). Teachers also emphasized assessment-based instruction and curricular mapping as tools to support success and growth (Peck, 2010, p. 398-399).

This change allowed teachers to play a rather large role in the development of their own curriculum. Peck (2010) delves further into the curriculum development process, emphasizing the balance of a teacher's autonomy and aligning with the local and state standards. In this study, the teachers and administrators worked together to develop desired outcomes, utilizing inquiry-based instruction, assessment-based instruction and curricular mapping in order to maximize potential success and growth (p. 397-399). These overarching strategies and tools were seemingly mandated by administrators, but how they were implemented into each of the teacher's classrooms appeared to be more or less the teacher's prerogative.

According to the literature, collaboration between the administration and teachers ensures that quality learning experiences for students are protected while fulfilling the requirements by district and state (Peck, 2010). Collaborative inquiry touches on this balanced collaborative process between administration and faculty. Love (2009) explains that effective collaborative inquiry targets short-term and long-term improvement. Though many administrators often advocate for the long-term outcomes that affect the school and district in years to come, short-term improvements are just as important, especially as a teacher. Short-term gains are "motivating for teachers and build trust with the public" while long-term improvements "build the capacity to sustain change over time, promote deep learning for students and teachers, and get all students achieving at high levels" (Love, 2009, p. 48). The duality of these two objectives help keep faculty and administrators alike focused on a balance that creates the most ideal

learning experience for the students. That balance needed for quality classroom experiences also includes attention to the sociocultural influences outlined in the next section.

III.   Sociocultural Influences

Sociocultural issues greatly influence the curriculum development process, implementation and learning. Of particular concern is the need for the curriculum to be responsive to learners and contexts.

Love's (2009) approach of consulting the data first demonstrates how the data teams use the data they've collected from students to take action and monitor their results. Love writes that the data teams further analyze the data in order to make adjustments to readdress areas in which the desired outcomes were not met. This is an example of reflective teaching, a method that prioritizes the need to be responsive to students and their sociocultural needs.

Missett et. al (2014) also outline a common method used by reflective practitioners known as formative assessment. Formative assessment is a tool that teachers use to integrate accelerated practices and ability grouping into their classrooms because the assessments provide data that can support immediate decision making regarding grouping and pacing for the best possible learning conditions and outcomes.

The same researchers also provide a recently developed model for curricular differentiation called the CLEAR (Challenge Leading to Engagement, Achievement and Results) Curriculum model (Missett et. al, 2014, p.246). The CLEAR Curriculum model includes strategies for adjusting pace, ability grouping, and formative assessment. The curriculum model makes several claims including that the greatest gains in personalized pacing and in ability

grouping for gifted students are found when the curriculum is differentiated. The findings from the study suggest that "teachers' beliefs about students and their capabilities are often reflected in an orientation toward either individual student needs or group needs, thus, students are grouped and proceed through a unit or curriculum according to their readiness levels" (Missett et al., 2014, p. 246, 254). When addressing the class as a whole and what is perceived to be the readiness level of the whole group, teachers in this study did not utilize personalized pacing or ability grouping and instead proceeded with a "one size fits all" approach. Misset et. al (2014) discuss the school's decision to adjust their practices and prioritize the needs of their students.

This focus on what the learner needs is further conceptualized in the work of Shirley Brice Heath (2018) who points to the ramifications of a consistent mismatch between school culture and a child's home culture. In practice, children whose cultures are not in line with those of teachers and policy makers are often framed as having "deficits," when in fact there is a need to conceptualize curriculum in culturally responsive ways. Heath addresses the lack of validity of "the literate tradition," or more specifically how children are from various cultural backgrounds and have access to different types of literacy events or levels of literate exposure and stimuli, which impact child development and learning. Often, there is a discrepancy between the language strengths that children bring to school from their homes and what is expected by the school. When this issue occurs, highly capable learners are often framed as "lacking" and, thus, are not afforded opportunities for success. Often not recognized, the child does not lack anything, but can only bring to the table the literacy events they have been exposed to away from school, which looks different from home to home.

Heath (2018) notes the bedtime story as a major literacy event that "helps set patterns of behavior that recur repeatedly" throughout the life of mainstream children (p. 319). Bedtime stories, as noted by the author, provide opportunity for intentional dialogue between parent and child in a literate context, supporting the child's verbal, linguistic and literacy development. Her work stresses the influence a child's family life and cultural or socioeconomic background has on types and amount of early literacy opportunities and events that take place and, thus, on success in school. In order to understand this connection between learners' early literacy experiences and school success, Heath (2018) explored children's experiences in three communities in North Carolina, Maintown, Roadville, and Trackton.

Maintown is composed of families who self-identify as typical, middle-class, and "mainstream" in relation to school culture. All participants of this particular study had preschoolers whose mothers were either teaching at the time of the study or during the year preceding. Within their nuclear households, children were exposed to books, murals, bedspreads, mobiles, and stuffed animal characters all around the age of 6 months; these children have been provided with ample amounts of stimuli in their surroundings. Past six months of age, the children developed at an arguably accelerated pace, "respond[ing] to conversational allusions to the content of books" and "us[ing] this knowledge of what books do to legitimize their departartures from "truth" (Heath, 2018, p. 320-325). These behaviors are both encouraged and rewarded. By the time these children are in preschool at the time of study, they accept book-related activities as entertainment, announcing their own factual and fictional narratives, but around this same time, adults begin to discourage the students' highly participative and

interactive role, now prompting students to be good listeners and synthesize information from stories.

Roadville children are brought home to colorful, tactile, musical, and literacy-based stimuli. Their earliest books are cloth books that provide tactile images with the following books providing sounds, smells, and different textures to practice small motor skills. For the typical 2-year-old, a full collection of books may consist of about a dozen books, 8 or so featuring the alphabet or numbers and others being nursery rhymes, Bible stories or "real-life" stories. Bedtime stories do occur, but scaffolding on the behalf of the parent or adult often takes place. Book reading time often focuses on the "letters of the alphabet, numbers, names of basic items, and simplified retellings of stories" (Heath, 2018, p. 325-331).

Lastly, Trackton children come home to an environment that is nearly all human with no cribs, car seats, or other stimuli such as books, murals, mobiles, etc… Infants do not seem to know anything outside human interaction, constantly being held in the midst of human verbal and nonverbal communication. Adults often regard babbling and cooing as "noise," with limited attempt to interpret these sounds as words. These adults also believe that they "should not have to depend on their babies to tell them what they need," nothing that "adults know, children only 'come to know'" (Heath, 2018, p. 331-336). Adults in Trackton do not sit and read with children and therefore book reading is not considered a leisure or entertainment activity. Until a child can become an active participant in the conversation, they are overlooked and talked around, which incentivizes students to learn how to communicate orally in order to be included. These children, however, typically struggle to learn the content of lessons and adopt the social-interactional rules of school literacy events.

Each of these communities rely heavily on different norms for the construction of knowledge in the early preschool years. Maintown relies on labeling procedures and what-explanations. Roadville also provides labels, features, and what-explanations, also prescribing listening and performing behaviors. Trackton is unlike either of the aforementioned towns; bedtime stories are replaced by other social interactions.

Because students possess different strengths, teachers must change the way in which they respond to these differences, adjusting what they do and how they do it to maximize the strengths these learners bring. Teachers cannot control what experiences with literacy their students each have at home, but they can be both aware of and responsive to student environmental and cultural factors in order to meet every student's individualized needs.

Discussion

The questions guiding this inquiry were "How is curriculum defined and represented?" and "What is the role of teachers in the development and implementation of curriculum?" According to the literature review synthesized for this paper, a broad answer would be, "it varies." To understand the complexity and importance of curriculum, we cannot rely on one definition or one scholar's approach. The administrators within different schools and districts who define curriculum influence the way in which it is represented and the teacher's role in the development and implementation process by providing certain standards for teachers to meet and curricular requirements for teachers to fulfill. From the perspective of a teacher, curriculum is often defined as the learning experiences prepared for students. Teachers develop learning experiences based on how a district or school theorizes curriculum or their beliefs about how

students learn. Guided by their district's curriculum beliefs, teachers will have certain requirements to fulfill as designated by their school and district. For example, a school may require the use of a specific curricular program and accompanying resources for teaching mathematics. The role of the teacher is to establish an action plan that both fulfills the requirements of the school but also integrates curricular experiences that best support the learner. In order to do so, teachers must integrate their preferred pedagogies and beliefs about effective curricular development with their district's curriculum expectations to implement a symbiotic relationship between the two factors.

Following the trend of variance, the approach to curriculum design varies greatly. These varied approaches indicate that different entities prefer different approaches based upon their own beliefs about how learners learn. However, a critical point I learned from the literature is that a teacher's philosophy of teaching affects the approach to curriculum development they prefer. Teachers must reflect upon their beliefs and knowledge of the different theories to make an informed decision regarding the approach that is best for their students' overall learning experiences and consider that they must also learn to balance their own pedagogical beliefs with their districts' curriculum requirements. For example, curricular resources selected by administration will impact the learning experiences a teacher can create for students to an extent, but simultaneously, teachers must integrate their pedagogical beliefs allowing them to discern the instructional strategies and learning activities they wish to develop to fulfill students' learning needs.

Fulfilling students' learning needs requires that teachers look outside of the curriculum they design and implement as a result of their beliefs and the school's or district's requirements;

curriculum design must take the students themselves into account, specifically the sociocultural differences that each student brings to the table. Differences such as students' sociocultural backgrounds affect the strengths they each bring into the classroom with them, and as a result, can highlight the areas in which they have not yet experienced development or growth. It is the teacher's moral duty to be responsive to these differences, finding ways to amend their curriculum design and implementation strategies to support their students' strengths as opposed to faulting their students for circumstances beyond their control, such as their sociocultural background or exposure to literacy events in their homes.

Implications for Pre-Service Teachers

Based on my review of literature, the findings, and discussion points notable implications for pre-service teachers are as follows. First, curriculum is complex. It is defined in different ways by different agents within the educational system, all of which impact preservice and beginning teachers. These differences especially affect teachers stepping into their first full-time teaching positions. These teachers must discern how those in their new community define curriculum to ensure that they are fully aware of what is expected of them by administration. A district's or school's definition and development of curriculum directly influences a teacher's decisions regarding curriculum design and enactment within their classrooms. Teachers must use their knowledge and understanding of curriculum to be able to purposefully make decisions regarding learning experiences in their classroom. Second, curriculum design is tied to belief systems. It is what one believes about teaching and learning that influences one's curriculum decisions. Therefore, it is essential to be clear about what one's beliefs regarding how students learn best and how to meet students' learning needs are as a preservice or beginning teacher. It

should be understood that when pre-service or beginning teachers are in the classroom, they will be working with many different views on best curriculum development and implementation practices and pedagogical processes. Beginning teachers may be challenged with finding a balance between their beliefs and the expectations placed upon them by their schools. This balance requires the ability to be adaptable while also remaining a firm advocate for their beliefs. The role of a teacher is largely influenced by the decisions others make, but teachers do have the moral responsibility to remain true to their own belief systems. There may be the potential need for teachers to advocate for their students against curriculum policies, if those policies are not in their students' best interests.

Lastly, because curriculum at its heart is a sociocultural issue, it is a moral issue. The decisions preservice and beginning teachers make impact children's lives. The learning experiences teachers provide have a direct impact on the student. However, students come from varied sociocultural backgrounds and have distinct, individualized needs. All preservice and beginning teachers should not only be aware of the impact they have, but be proactive by designing and implementing a curriculum that is responsive to students and their needs, adapting as needed to ensure maximum student growth and success. Curriculum is ever-changing because the students in each class are ever-changing, and preservice teachers must be open and willing to consistently alter their approaches to meet the needs of their students. At the very core, a teacher's purpose is to cultivate their students' growth, prioritizing their needs and successes over any particular curricular approach or method.

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