Chapter 6

Going Deeper into Curriculum and Pedagogical Activity

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Abstract This chapter takes a deeper dive into curriculum and pedagogy as these are defined and applied within *education*. Here terminology like pedagogy, curriculum, leadership (including leadership teams) and education itself are defined in terms of a particular ‘educational’ interest. Such an approach also features a mediation among state and national standards and the needs and interests of children. This approach sees the task of educating children as necessarily occurring in the pedagogical relation between teacher and student in classrooms and between formal leader/principal and teacher in schools and between district leader/superintendent and principals. We recognize the value of understanding the foundations of education developed in earlier times of political and cultural uncertainty. We explicitly define key terms for education, curriculum, pedagogy and leadership in school development using foundational understandings amidst the contemporary situation. Application of the concepts is explored through case studies.

Keywords Education · Pedagogy · Curriculum · Leadership

“I love the ELA strategies. Anytime you guys do a ... Like what you did this morning with the grouping, yesterday with the 3 cards. I find that ... That’s hands on. I can use that. I also really like the science where it was inquiry based. I had never done science that way. That hands on learning I really appreciate. Close reading was another one.” Teacher A

“We talked about the strategies and kind of the resources that you can look back into your toolbox. You can’t possibly use everything and implement it. It just doesn’t work that way. You use the things that you’re problem solving now. Then, like you said, once you get the foundation for decision-making in place and you get this idea of what engagement looks like in place, and you’ve got these things that you’ve all agreed upon, then you can roll out your ELA strategies that you want to put in place. Consistency. Kids need structure and they need consistency.” Teacher B

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This chapter takes a deeper dive into curriculum and pedagogy as these are defined and applied within *education*. Here terminology like pedagogy, curriculum, leadership (including leadership teams) and education itself are defined in terms of a particular ‘educational’ interest. Such an approach also features a mediation among state and national standards and the needs and interests of children. This approach sees the task of educating children as necessarily occurring in the pedagogical relation between teacher and student in classrooms and between formal leader/principal and teacher in schools and between district leader/superintendent and principals. A relative degree of human freedom is assumed and guaranteed for the state, district, principal, teacher and ultimately for the child.

Educators in the U.S. and elsewhere must implement increasingly centralized state and national curriculum standards as measured by externalized evaluations. At the same time, schools across the U.S. and elsewhere are educating increasingly diverse students due to changing demographics as well as immigrants or refugees from globalization. As noted in the opening chapters, these challenges are not entirely new in the U.S. and elsewhere. In an earlier zone of uncertainty from the turn of the nineteenth century through two World Wars, John Dewey (1916) argued for a deliberative approach in his philosophy as the theory of education whereby schools functioned as a microcosm of a democratic society. Dewey’s efforts to connect child, school, and society were motivated by more than just a desire for better higher standards or pedagogical methods. For Dewey, because character, rights and duties are informed by and contribute to the social realm, schools were critical sites to learn and experiment with the democratic prospect. Here democratic life consisted not only of civic and economic conduct but in habits of problem solving, compassionate imagination, creative expression, and civic self-governance. During World War II, Dewey (1944) wrote,

“There will be almost a revolution in school education when study and learning are treated not as acquisition of what others know but as development of capital to be invested in eager alertness in observing and judging the conditions under which one lives. Yet until this happens, we shall be ill-prepared to deal with a world whose outstanding trait is change” (p. 463).

We are not arguing that we must strictly adhere to theories developed historically, but we recognize the value of understanding the foundations of education developed in earlier times of political and cultural uncertainty. In the next several paragraphs, we explicitly define key terms for education, curriculum, pedagogy and leadership in school development using foundational understandings amidst the contemporary situation.

Education is an explicitly interpersonal and ethical endeavor, one that regards the individual student or child as an end in himself—rather than in terms of pre-defined categories of social identity, psychological technique or academic achievement (Friesen, 2019). Such an approach does not ignore questions of politics but focuses on the task of educating children. Here we turn to Dewey as well as the traditions that informed his work since the Enlightenment to understand the task of educating children as necessarily occurring within and through the tensions between

the individual and society, between freedom and constraint, between present realities and future possibilities (Friesen & Ylimaki, 2019; Price et al., 2019). That education finds its goal in the eventual autonomy of the student—in their ability to decide for themselves and to participate in social deliberation as well—means that its central purpose is a democratic one. Moreover, it seeks to achieve this goal not through psychological techniques or manipulations nor through sociological categorizations, but by taking informed risks, granting the student limited but ever increasing degrees of autonomy in a teacher-student relation in which they can also find trust and safety.

Pedagogy in this context is *not* the application of evidence-based teaching practices and models for teaching. Here we draw on historical perspectives as synthesized by Friesen (2019) to argue that pedagogy is an interpersonal, artful and relational calling and craft that possesses its own “dignity” outside of theory and “evidence.” It appears as the formative cultivation of children and young people as ends in themselves, with a view to their becoming responsive members of society (e.g., Biesta, 2015). Pedagogy in this sense is also the theory of this engagement and cultivation, with the understanding that its relation to practice always relies on the artful and tactful mediation of the teacher (e.g., Herbart, 1896). Evidence is used as a source of reflection and planning for pedagogical decisions.

Curriculum is cultural aims and interests translated into content. Curriculum is not only a policy document that reflects cultural aims and interests like the state version of Common Core content, but is fully situated in an educator-student pedagogical relation or in the dynamic between the self-realization of the young person and the public, policy and curricular demands (e.g. see: Friesen, 2019; Klafki, 2000).

Leadership is, at heart, a pedagogical and mediational activity whereby principals are teachers of teachers, and superintendents are teachers of principals. This relationship is not unlike that of teachers and students in classrooms (Uljen and Ylimaki, 2017). Like teachers who must mediate between the curriculum standards and students, principals and superintendents must mediate between policies and other expectations and the needs of teachers and students in particular schools and communities. In order to support continuous improvement, leadership from multiple levels must work in teams to deliberate on problems of practice that support both policy interests or demands and the interests or needs of increasingly culturally diverse children.

Application

Throughout the school development project, participants were asked to explore state standards or cultural aims translated into content, and possibilities for pedagogy in particular situations. The first step was to explore the policy shifts from the old set of standards and assessment to the new state standards in terms of content in Arizona College and Career Readiness Standards (Arizona’s version of the Common Core Standards) (2016) as well as pedagogical strategies or interventions in relation to the

needs of young people. In the area of English/Language Arts (ELA) (2016), the new standards required students to build knowledge through content-rich non-fiction, to ground reading, writing and speaking in evidence from text (both literary and informational), and to have regular practice with complex text and its academic language. In Mathematics (2016), teachers were required to focus on coherence of standards across grade levels, with attention to rigor, conceptual understanding, procedural skill and fluency, and application. Participants then examined sample state assessment questions for format and what was demanded of the students in order to be successful. Moreover, teams were asked to bring examples of formative student assessments that reflected needs of particular children. They were asked to identify pedagogical strategies that would support the child's development academically and otherwise. Finally, the school teams reflected on the needs of teachers and how to support them to be immediately successful with particular children and cohorts of children.

Teams were also asked to plan how to address parents and community in a 1–2 min timeframe, like an “elevator speech”. The whole concept of common core standards was receiving backlash nationally for a variety of reasons. Mainly, the belief that these common core standards were being forced on states by the federal government, and a lack of understanding about what they were and what they asked students to know and be able to do, caused tensions in many communities.

Additionally, experts in ELA and mathematics were asked to share strategies for teachers to use in classrooms to mediate among the greater rigor of the new standards and needs of children. Groups were divided into elementary and secondary so that the information could be geared to the levels of interest.

Using the strategies outlined in *The Core Six: Essential Strategies for Achieving Excellence with the Common Core* (Silver et al., 2012), participants experienced using each strategy as they learned about them. The six strategies outlined and practiced included: Reading for Meaning, Compare and Contrast, Inductive Learning, Circle of Knowledge, Write to Learn, and Vocabulary's CODE (Silver et al., 2012). Then as school teams, participants discussed the comfort level and facility of their own staff to implement the new reading strategies in order to support and mediate among the complexity of the new state standards and children in their schools. Finally, school teams worked together to create a plan to share and diffuse the information they had gained about standards and strategies to teachers, other staff and parents/community members. In other words, our application of contemporary school development grounded in education, curriculum and pedagogy was culturally sensitive to the Arizona context and individuals within it. We will expand on this point in the next chapter.

Interestingly, when working with school teams, we were stunned by the lack of knowledge and understanding about curriculum and pedagogy. Generally they understood standards, knew they needed objectives, but were mandated to use pre-packaged programs which did not allow for deep thought about how children learn to read or do mathematics. In some of the more urban districts, teachers had the benefit of internal experts who understood content specific curriculum and pedagogy and were providing professional development for teachers on an ongoing basis. In the more rural settings, however, this ongoing development was lacking.

Lessons Learned

The following two cases highlight some aspects of the implementation of evolving curricular and pedagogical activity at the school level.

Case A: Sun City Elementary School

Comprised of approximately 730 students in grades K-6, Sun City Elementary School serves 77% Hispanic students, 20% Native American students, and the remaining 3% identify as White or 2 or more races. The free and reduced lunch rate is about 91%. They see themselves as primarily a neighborhood school, although most of the native American students reside on the local reservation lands. Principal Isaac Elias has led the school for over 10 years, and was able to reflect on several aspects that resulted from their time with the School Development Project.

First, Isaac focused on the implementation of lesson study and peer observation.

“So, one of the things that did come up that we did this year that we had never done in the past...was having lesson studies done at each grade level...each grade level presented lessons and the rest of their teammates observed...them and afterwards gave them feedback, then the next teacher and the next teacher. So we did that with every grade level this year. So we are really looking to build upon that for next year to make it even more effective.”

He elaborated further on the collaborative aspect of curriculum development and planning.

“I think the biggest impact has been in the area of collaboration and trying to continually improve that process and make it more productive. We’re seeing a greater focus on the actual planning, especially with the new standards and having a better process for breaking those down...you know the process for that, the fact that the whole focus on collaboration and working together and having those PLCs in place and teachers having that system of planning and continually meeting and having our coaches being a part of that as far as supporting them and helping to drive that process of breaking down the standards.”

Additionally, Mr. Elias recognized the need for school leaders to work with teachers, coaching them as they implement new standards and different pedagogies.

“There was a lot of dialogue around the topic of coaching and looking at those different scenarios and strategies and ideas that she presented. It was just a good discussion with myself and our coaches and our teachers to be able to get into specifics or some different ideas of approaches to working with teachers and coaching.”

Sun City Elementary School was fortunate to be located in an urban school district that did provide ongoing development opportunities in pedagogy, allowing this staff to take what they gained from the AZiLDR Institutes and expand on it with internal support.

Case B: *Smithson High School Revisited*

As a reminder, Smithson High School is a public high school in southern Arizona, serving grades 9–12 and over 1500 students. The principal, Mr. Tierney, (at the time of the project) was a white male in his mid-thirties, who began teaching in 2005. After 5 years in the classroom, he was promoted to an assistant principal position, and 1 year later was thrust into the principal position with the abrupt removal of the previous principal.

Smithson High School and Principal Tierney entered the project at the direction of the superintendent due to declining test scores and community pressure to improve. The associate superintendent, Bob Burlington, attended each training with the Smithson principal and team so that he could support them in their endeavors.

However, during this time, the district purchased a curriculum package that included pacing guides, materials, lesson plans, etc. Every school within the district was mandated to use the curriculum with integrity, adhering to all parts. As the school team and teachers learned more about curriculum and pedagogy, and Principal Tierney enrolled in a PHD program with particular emphasis on leadership of curriculum and pedagogy, they requested permission to adjust the pacing guide and to supplement the curriculum to meet the needs of their students. They were denied.

In his own words, Principal Tierney explains:

“We began to discover that the mandates of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top and the Arizona Career and College Readiness standards (that are common core) were difficult to bring about the changes necessary in the curriculum in order for us to be able to adhere to and to excel in the new paradigm. That created some problems. One is it exposed the communication issues that we have. Schools weren’t talking to each other. People within departments were rarely talking to each other and it was just kind of the relic of the past and how it had been, and so we got together as a leadership team (principals) and we basically said we need something to help us get there; and we were excited about the Beyond textbooks...because it was billed to us as ‘here is a template for you to do things. You still get to choose how to teach it but this gives you a template’, which was exciting. We were, okay, this is from a district that has consistently been at the top or the second best in the entire state for many years. This is going to be a helpful thing. Like most things, it is complicated.

Final Thoughts

Deep understanding of curriculum and pedagogy have taken a backseat to prepackaged programs which were often designed to be “teacher-proof.” It has been our observation (as well as that of many of our content experts) that we have an entire generation of teachers, and increasingly a generation of leaders, who grew up under No Child Left Behind and the increased accountability that drives decisions. They have only known packaged programs, many of which are scripted, and have never

been asked to make decisions about the needs of their students and how to best approach their learning. It is our hope that calling attention to this issue will help as we go forward in school development work around the world.

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