Empowering Students as Active Participants in Curriculum Design and Implementation

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ABSTRACT

Curriculum is constructed with the learner as its central focus. Yet the voice of the learner is largely excluded from the curriculum design and implementation process. The intent of this paper is to seek a deeper understanding of the potential for increased learning when students are included in curriculum design. To support this position, the authors review how curriculum perspectives have historically recognised the absence of student voice in curriculum planning. The analysis is not exhaustive, but hopes to review the work of significant theorists from the past hundred years. Building from this review, a case is presented as to why students should be included in the process. To bolster the philosophical argument in favour of student voice, research-based evidence is reviewed that shows positive results when students are included in the curriculum planning process. The paper concludes with a review of how the Ministry of Education in Alberta is changing its view of the role of the learner.

INTRODUCTION

The field of curriculum theory is broad, complex, and diverse. For the last hundred years, the role and design of curriculum has regularly been debated. However, through all these debates, student voice has been marginalised. Considering that all curricula are constructed and implemented for the education of students, the omission of these silent stakeholders from the curriculum process seems odd. Questions about how and what to teach students have been asked for decades, but these questions have seldom been posed to students. Ignoring student voice has been a problem noted by curricular theorists; however, only more recently has student participation in curriculum development been actively pursued.

In this paper, we focus on the potential of empowering student voice and outline why we believe student involvement in curriculum planning will improve student learning. We briefly review historic curriculum perspectives that draw attention to the need for student voice and then connect these early arguments

to present reasons why students should become active partners in the curriculum planning process. We incorporate both philosophical perspectives and practical successes witnessed in current participatory design projects. We then balance this discussion with barriers to incorporating student voice. Finally, we consider where Alberta currently falls in the spectrum of student involvement and the possibilities that exist for increased student involvement in our own practices as educational leaders.

WHAT IS STUDENT VOICE AND PARTICIPATORY DESIGN?

Considering student voice is relatively new in the educational field. In fact, only in the last ten years has actively including students in school planning gained ground (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). Although there are multiple definitions of student voice, this paper defines student voice as the systematic inclusion and empowerment of students in the decision-making processes of schools (Mitra & Gross, 2009). Our paper will not focus on student voice in all the facets of school decision-making but will focus specifically on the role students can play in building the content and structure of the curriculum in their classrooms and schools.

One common method of achieving student voice in this specific area is through participatory design projects. For the purposes of this paper, participatory design includes any initiative that has as its basis the involvement of the end-user in the design process (Konings, Brand-Gruwel, Saskia & van Merriernboer, 2010). We should note that, throughout this paper, we use *student voice* and *student participation* interchangeably. In both cases the term refers specifically to the concept of student involvement in curriculum planning and implementation at the class, school, or provincial level.

Insights of previous curricular theorists on student voice

To place current practice in perspective, it is important to review the historic role of students in curriculum development. Because this is a brief overview, rather than an in-depth analysis, we have been selective in which curriculum theorists we use. Our intent is not to rank curriculum theory perspectives as to their incorporation of students in the discussion but rather to overview how different theorists have understood the concept of student participation.

Foundational to modern educational thought regarding curriculum is the work of R. W. Tyler. Tyler's approach to curriculum was both logical and rigid. He proposed a hierarchy to address all curricula using four simple steps: (1) outlining purposes, (2) experiences, (3) organisation, and (4) evaluation. Tyler's idea was simple: construct curriculum using these steps; then, apply that curriculum to students in classrooms (Tyler, 1975). Today, curriculum thinkers seem to demonise Tyler; however, we forget that Tyler mirrored the social and economic history of his time. Furthermore, even Tyler's *traditional* perspective suggests the need for student empowerment in curriculum planning. Tyler recognised that students should be engaged by the instruction they receive and that:

If a school activity is perceived as interesting and/or useful for his purposes, he enters into it energetically, whereas if it seems irrelevant or boring or painful, he avoids it, or limits his involvement as much as he can. I have found that observing and interviewing students when they are actively engaged in learning things they think important help me to develop initial outlines for experiences that will help these students learn things the school seeks to teach. (p. 28)

Obviously, Tyler's curriculum perspective influenced much of the twentieth century; it is also obvious that recent scholars have challenged his views. Western Canadian scholar Ted Aoki specifically moved beyond the idea of curriculum as *plan* to address curriculum as *lived* in classrooms. Aoki believed educators should shift curriculum perspective to understand the language and life of those involved in living curriculum. By engaging this shift, education moves towards curriculum with room for the 'otherness of others' (Aoki, 1993, p. 266).

Paulo Freire,[1] spanning almost the same time frame as Aoki, outlined concerns similar to Aoki's. He was critical of a common approach to education, which he described as a *banking system,* where students were perceived to lack knowledge and must instead have it *bestowed upon them* by educators who *owned* it (Freire, 1993). Freire believed students must play a more active role. To Freire, the 'being' of education was to eliminate the apparent contradiction between teachers and students 'so that both are simultaneously teachers and students' (p. 2). To overcome the depository form of knowledge, Freire believed education must involve practical problem-solving that incorporated the consciousness and worldview of the learner.

Finally, Eliot Eisner (2001) outlines the role of students in curriculum development and questions the nefarious power of external assessments on a teacher's curricular decisions. Eisner believed external sources weigh more heavily on classroom decisions than the learning needs of students. Eisner asks, 'What opportunities do students have to formulate their own purposes and to design ways to achieve them?' (Eisner, 2001, p. 371). We believe Eisner had it right: formulating one's own purposes is always an exciting adventure.

Why include students in curriculum development?
Including students in curriculum development carries both philosophical and practical questions. Philosophically, in a democratic society, what is the rightful place of student voice in curriculum development? Pragmatically, does including student voice improve learning? Does student voice bring tangible benefits in student engagement and, as a result, achievement? Recent research linking student voice to engagement and achievement has found positive links between engagement and learning. For example, Carini, Kuh, and Klein's (2006) broad-based, university-level analysis found that 'student

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[1] In Jim's career at the University of Alberta, Aoki engaged Freire to teach summer courses in the Department of Secondary Education. The two educators knew each other well.

engagement is linked positively to desirable learning outcomes such as critical thinking and grades' (p. 23).

As increasing student participation gains the attention of curriculum theorists, new arguments are added to historical concerns about the lack of learner voice. Thompson (2009) notes, 'through mass education, the child was turned into a passive, docile recipient of adult knowledge' (p. 763). If, philosophically, students' participatory learning is the core of education, there is no logic in marginalising the learner's participation from curriculum production. Teamwork towards the building of common goals has already shown dividends in work settings, but only recently is full participation finding its way into schools (Levin, 2000).

The consequence of not involving learners is another reason to support the inclusion of student voice. To be successful learners, students must understand process and structure – naturally or formally. If they do not feel connected to the curriculum or course objectives they will become their own barriers to learning through disruptive practice (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). The move away from cookie-cutter curriculum, where all students are treated as if they shared the same skills and aptitudes and should be measured by corporate summative evaluations is based upon privileging an understanding that learners differ and that teachers who better understand those differences can more successfully engage learners. Teachers can never really know a learner's instructional struggles until they really know that learner. If students are denied opportunities to communicate their perceptions or guide instructional change, their learning suffers (Konings *et al.*, 2010).

Over the last decade, participatory action designs involving students have become more common. A review of school-based projects provides compelling data for why students should be involved. Crawford, Krajcik, and Marx (1999) tracked a student design model in a middle school science class and found that when students initiated tasks and engaged in collaborative interactions, group productivity increased. The key was that students gained strong senses of ownership and responsibility as they answered their own research questions. Crawford and colleagues found that real-world questions were better for collaborative work than topic-bound questions, and that 'collaborative interactions of the group members increased when the tasks were student-initiated' (p. 712).

When learners engage knowledge without following the specific path of Tyler's logical sequence from plan to content, it is crucial that teachers come to trust learners to engage knowledge without being led to it; and, such trust can come hard. Teachers really do care that students come to knowledge: we want our students to learn. Having the patience and the courage to trust learner explorations is central to the seemingly audacious curriculum ideas of Aoki and Freire; but, moving from believing in theory to engaging in practice seldom makes 'letting go' easier. Trust comes hard for caring teachers, and we need to define what letting go really might mean in practice.

We are gaining evidence that trusting enough to let go can be fruitful. Now we just need to figure out how close or how far teachers need to be with learners – and, we are coming to believe that these answers might differ from learner to learner and from year to year. Thompson's (2009) research project on student voice in the learning process analysed student and teacher response to

'the principle and experience of consultation about learning' (p. 671). Thompson found that teachers play a significant role in the process but that educators are not consistent about what student participation should include.

Thompson (2009) divides educators involved in participatory design into three groups: (1) proactive consultation, (2) managerial consultation, and (3) constrained consultation. Student feedback showed that students emotionally valued teachers who considered their views; students also believed that teachers in the proactive and managerial groups were more genuine in recognising student input than those in the constrained group. Students showed an awareness that learning involved forming a trust relationship between teacher and student. When student-teacher interactions became less genuine or encompassing, the number of interactions decreased and learning slowed (Thompson, 2009).

Barriers to including student voice in curriculum design

Often, challenging the status quo brings barriers. First, the concept of student participation must be clearly defined and both student and teacher expectations must be understood by those involved in change. Foundational to this joint understanding is the recognition by both groups that learners are 'responsible and capable' (Thompson, 2009, p. 674). Without responsibility or capability, communication breaks down and teacher-student interactions become teacher-controlled. Artificially introduced student voice can actually harm school environments, especially where a history of students being treated with disrespect exists.

Insincere approaches to student teacher partnership lead to student disengagement and alienation (Mitra & Gross, 2009). The current educational system is not designed to equip teachers to enter the profession with the necessary philosophical understanding and coaching skills to create opportunities for student teacher partnership. Even when pre-service teachers have been involved in such partnerships at the university level, these same teachers report having difficulty constructing communities of shared responsibility in their own classrooms (Crawford *et al*., 1999). The work is far from easy.

Barriers to participatory design are caused by many reasons: these include a lack of buy-in by the educational system and poor communication of expectations. In some cases, learners raise their own concerns. Learners who have learned to be successful are reticent to re-learn a new system, even if that system might promise expanded long-term gains. Many students have grown comfortable with an educational system that constrains and guides them through a process based on external expectations (Albers, 2009). These students have learned the 'rules' so well that these rules have become internalised and normal. The increased time it takes to be involved with the process as an active participant is another barrier. Students admit they have become used to a system that calls for 'surface learning' and that opportunities to plot a deeper course of study seem time consuming (Albers, 2009; Crawford *et al*., 1999).

CONSIDERING STUDENT VOICE IN ALBERTA

After gaining an understanding of the historical perspective of the role of the student in curriculum theory, constructing an argument in favour of participatory action, and reviewing potential barriers to introducing curriculum change, we would like to consider the status of the student role in curriculum in Alberta. As educators, we believe we should frame our theoretical position on student voice within the context of local education policy: in other words, how we should engage students in Alberta today. As a principal, John's focus is the needs of those people who inhabit his school. As the Director of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta, Jim's focus is working with teachers and administrators throughout the province. In these roles, we are beginning to gain insight into what is occurring in classrooms around the province. Together, and with others, we work with Alberta Education (the arm of the provincial government), to broadly influence curriculum change. Here, we engage these roles to discuss student participation.

We are encouraged by a noticeable shift in the Ministry of Education over the last few years towards creating opportunities for involving students in the planning process. Particularly visible is the recognition that student engagement is valuable. Alberta Education has made student engagement a specific outcome for the most recent three-year cycle of Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) (Alberta Education, 2008). Although this step furthers students' role in education, it does not necessarily create a place for them at the curriculum development table.

However, in the past year Alberta Education has taken another step to increase student participation. As part of the 'Inspiring Education' initiative, student focus groups were included as stakeholders in the process. Notably, Alberta Education constructed a website entitled 'Speak Out', which gives students opportunities to express their views about the future of education in Alberta. Unfortunately, student participation was not used to create a template for future curricular planning. Although student engagement is heavily emphasised in the steering committee's report for 'Inspiring Education', active student participation is not (Alberta Education, 2010). To take the next step, curriculum planners in Alberta should bring student voice specifically into the curriculum planning discussion.

So where does this leave us as educators? We are more solidified in our belief that student participation is a crucial step towards student engagement. We find clear evidence that including students at all levels is both possible and fruitful. Alberta Education's push for student engagement also helps those at the school level find opportunities for incorporating student voice and encourages a broader teacher perspective about the genuine role of students by tying student engagement to AISI projects and other professional learning opportunities.

Some steps seem simple. For example, principals might encourage teachers to begin courses by helping students engage in a curriculum audit and critique. Such an approach can help empower students to better understand course expectations and allow opportunities to influence classroom materials and instructional approaches. In addition, learners might become more meta-cognitive about their own learning needs. Such cautious first steps more fully

recognise students as active participants in the learning process and help create an educational space where theory and practice can interact.

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