

Teacher as Curriculum Leader: A Consideration of the Appropriateness of that Role Assignment to Classroom-Based Practitioners

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Educational literature, theory, and reform trends have long promoted putting teachers in a central role in curricular design. The longevity of the discourse for meaningful and sustained teacher involvement in curriculum development or design reflects the failure of such involvement to become common practice. Although explanation for the failure of comprehensive implementation of teacher as curriculum leader has been centered in hegemonic, bureaucratic, or paternalistic organizations common within schools, other hypotheses should be considered. This article provides a consideration of role requirements and the competency of teachers provided through teacher education programs as another hypothesis for this failure, questions the assertion that the role of curriculum leader is an appropriate one for teachers, and provides suggestions for the restructuring of university curricula and otherwise better prepare teachers to fulfill the curriculum leader role.

Educational literature, theory, and reform trends have long promoted putting teachers in a central role in curricular design. The work of early theorists recognized the importance of the role of the classroom teacher in curricular development at the building level (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004). Literature on teacher leadership demonstrates that efforts to generalize teacher-leadership within educational organizational systems have occurred for more than two decades without significant or sustained success (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Scholars across the decades have identified limited engagement of teachers in meaningful decision-making as a major flaw in educational organization and suggest that it has been elemental in the failure of meaningful educational reform efforts (Barth, 1990; Fullan, 1993; Giroux, 1988; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004; Young, 1979).

The longevity of the academic discourse on meaningful and sustained teacher involvement in school-based decision-making suggests an underlying theoretical assumption that such organizational structures would ultimately result in improved student outcomes. Research from the last two decades, however, has not demonstrated a strong or consistent correlation between teacher leadership and improved student outcome (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). The literature, however, provides little consideration of professional knowledge, specifically knowledge of curriculum theory and critical pedagogy, as an underlying reason for the failure of teachers to successfully fulfill meaningful leadership roles supportive of educational reforms and improved student outcomes. This article provides consideration of the assertion that the role of curriculum leader is an appropriate one for teachers in light of contemporary teacher preparation programs and offers suggestions for the restructuring of university curricula to better prepare teachers to fulfill the role of curriculum leader.

Historical Role of Teacher in Curriculum Development

Little of the early literature on curriculum development calls for teachers to take curricular leadership roles. Early work clearly centers teachers' curricular role within the classroom and focused on instructional practice. The relegation of teachers to an ancillary role in curricular development reflects common assumptions regarding women and the responsibilities of teachers in the first half of the 20th century. Examinations of teacher preparation programs offered at the time and of contemporary teacher job descriptions provide additional evidence of such limited assumptions (Ogren, 2005).

As early as 1928, Rugg and Shumaker (1928) recognized the need for teacher involvement in curriculum development and suggested that teachers work collaboratively with curriculum specialists to organize content and materials. Similarly, Caswell and Campbell (1935) supported teacher participation in curriculum committees at all levels, partly because they believed such participation would help teachers align content with student needs. Nevertheless, neither Rugg and Shumaker (1928) nor Caswell and Campbell (1935) placed overall responsibility for curriculum, especially at the district level, in the hands of teachers.

In 1949, Ralph Tyler's work *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* presented a recipe for planning curriculum which still stands as a common model for curriculum development today. Tyler (1949) centered the classroom teacher within the curriculum development process. However, Tyler (1949) did not delineate who should take a leadership role in the development of classroom level curricula and suggested a belief in the limitation of teacher potential for successful curricular leadership.

In the second half of the 20th Century, teacher education significantly changed. Normal Schools morphed into State Teacher Colleges. Teacher preparation became significantly more comprehensive with a Bachelor's Degree being required for initial certification (Ogren, 2005); more men entered the field; and assumptions regarding women as capable leaders were changing. Similarly, associated academic scholarship demonstrated a shift in the perceived roles of teachers in curricular development. For example, Taba (1962) rejected Tyler's (1949) assumptions that curriculum should be created by curriculum specialists at the district level, but advocated that curriculum development should be a bottom-up process with teachers in central roles for development and leadership.

By the end of the 20th Century, a significant body of literature called for empowerment of teachers through control of the curriculum (Asuto, Clark, Read, McGree, & deKoven Pelton Fernancez, 1994). Scholars placed teacher involvement at the center of effective realization of fundamental educational reform (Fullan, 1991; Sarason, 1990). Contemporary curriculum scholarship places teachers in a central role in curriculum development, implementation, and evaluation (Lieberman, Saxl, & Miles, 1988/2001; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004). The appropriateness and potential for successful role fulfillment by most teachers, however, remains unclear and poorly supported.

Research on Teachers and Curricular Decision-Making

Research on teacher participation in curricular decision-making is varied. The literature focuses heavily on the engagement of teachers in the determination of curriculum within their own schools or within their own classrooms. Site-based management efforts over the decades have consistently demonstrated that despite administrative directives for teachers to take an active role in the determination of curricula within their own work settings, the efficacy of such measures is limited (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Much of the work on this subject makes clear that teacher involvement does not lead to active engagement or successful curricular change. Weiss (1993) determined that when it came to curricular decision-making, despite the fact that teachers in site-based management organizations were more involved in discussion, implementation of ideas was more rapid and successful in schools with traditional decision-making hierarchies. Nevertheless, Weiss (1993) concluded that her data did not support an assumption that teacher participation increased focused attention to curriculum or affected improved curricular design. Although teachers may perceive significant influence on practice when teachers take leadership in curricular decision-making (Ryan, 1999), evidence in large studies does not show any significant change in student outcomes. In two large studies, Leithwood and Jantzi (1999; 2000) determined that teacher leadership demonstrated no insignificant effect on student engagement and outcomes.

Weiss' (1993) findings may reflect a manifestation of teacher self-perception and role identification. The literature on this topic reflects a general ennui by teachers participating in activities not directly associated with their classroom teaching. Young (1979) asked teachers if they would like a more

participants indicated interest in participation in curriculum development work (Young, 1979). Duke, Shower, and Imber (1980) noted that teachers demonstrated little desire to participate in school level decision-making and found little satisfaction when they did so. Similarly, Conley (1991) found that teachers preferred to engage in classroom level curricula decision-making rather than participate at the organizational level. Conley (1991) also noted that despite a lack of desire to be engaged in organizational level decision-making, teachers expressed unhappiness when they felt they had been left out of larger decision-making processes. In a study of teacher beliefs regarding their work activities, teachers demonstrated positive attitudes about taking part in responsibilities they viewed as directly associated with classroom teaching, but demonstrated ambivalent or negative responses to non-instructional activities (Eisenhart, Cuthbert, Shurm, & Harding, 1993). Archbald and Porter (1994) reported ambiguous findings relative to assertions “that higher levels of curriculum control are likely to come at the expense of teachers’ morale and feelings of efficacy on the job” (p. 31).

Other work on teachers as curricular decision-makers focuses on the qualifications and professional preparation for success in such work. In a study of the effectiveness of teacher-driven development and implementation of community-oriented social studies curriculum and curriculum-based assessments, Mabry and Ettinger (1999) found teachers to have limited skill and knowledge relative to assessment literacy and cited this as one of the “intractable problems” inherent to effective curricular leadership role fulfillment. Although not focused specifically on the topic of curriculum studies knowledge, studies demonstrated expertise and deep understanding of the “educational enterprise” or the “big picture” were “foundational” to presumptions of credibility of teacher leaders by their colleagues and the overall success of teacher leaders to affect change within their schools (Acker-Hocevar & Touchton, 1999; Snell & Swanson, 2000; Stone, Horejs, & Lamas, 1997). In the above referenced study, Mabry and Ettinger (1999) found that the teachers most in need of professional development and training responded to it slowly or not at all, suggesting that some teacher have no interest in expansion of their knowledge and competencies beyond what they perceive to be necessary and relevant to their assumed roles.

Curriculum Leader Role Requirements

The role of teacher and that of curriculum leader are not naturally equivalent. Teachers must have comprehensive understanding of their content areas and methods for communicating knowledge to students. A curriculum leader is a person who has not only a comprehensive understanding of the pragmatics of curricular design and instructional practice, but also a global understanding of education as a societal enterprise. While the role of teacher and that of curriculum leader are complementary, the roles and associated competencies are not the same.

On the practical side, perhaps the side that is most frequently recognized by elementary and secondary school educators, curriculum is characterized as what is to be taught, in what order, in what way, and by whom (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004). Teachers are generally professionally prepared to engage in discussions of curriculum in this frame. Textbook content, their own instructional experiences, and state-level content standards further support teachers’ ability to engage in curricular decisions within this conceptual frame. Such ordering of content, planning activities and assessments, or matching content to state standards is better conceptualized as lesson decision-making versus curriculum decision-making.

On the pragmatic end of the spectrum of requirements, curricular leaders must demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between assessment data and instructional design, particularly in light of the current dominance of progress monitoring and “Response to Intervention” paradigms. To meet the diverse needs represented in each classroom, curriculum leadership requires an ability to recognize the need for the best design and implementation techniques of a broad range of instructional variations.

Curriculum leadership requires more than a general understanding of psychology, as curriculum leaders must consider developmental, cognitive, emotional, and communicative factors as they relate to the reception and expression of content learning. Curriculum leaders must be well versed and articulate in

classic and contemporary educational research, theory, and practical expectations across all subcategories including learning and instructional methodologies. They must have strong theoretical bases on which to build and they must be able to functionally separate the theoretical from the practical as needed (Hlebowitsh, 1999; Pinar, 1992).

Curricular leaders must demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of education as a political and social enterprise. Curricular leaders must understand educational purposes of school, what educational experiences are likely to serve those purposes, and how to effectively organize and evaluate those experiences (Tyler, 1949). They must be ever cognizant of the ideology, bias, political agendas, and hegemonies that influence what is taught, how it is taught, and by whom it is taught in every classroom in America (Apple, 1996, 2000, 2004; Freire, 1970/2004; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004). With the locus of control over the curriculum having shifted to that of the State (Fullan, 2001), today's curriculum leaders must have a substantial and current knowledge of state and national educational policy development, implementation. They must also be diligent in ongoing monitoring of debates and changing policies at all levels of influence.

University Level Program Study Findings

Teacher roles, whether real or perceived, are established during university career preparation. University teacher preparatory programs fundamentally influence the view of teachers relative to the conceptualization of curriculum and their level of responsibility for its determination. While most teachers leave their university training with knowledge of instructional and evaluation methodologies to effectively manage classroom curricular implementation tasks, few have the depth and breadth of knowledge in the other requisite areas to be effective curricular leaders. For many reasons, teacher preparation programs have come to focus on technical pedagogy to the near exclusion of historical, philosophical, or socio-political contexts. Moreover, few specifically or coherently introduce undergraduates to curriculum theory or critical pedagogy. The small study presented here evaluated undergraduate teacher preparation program requirements in the areas of educational foundations and curricular theory.

Study Design

To explore the question: Are teacher education programs providing undergraduate, pre-service teachers with the depth and breadth of knowledge in the areas of curriculum theory and educational foundations (i.e., history, philosophy, and socio-political content) necessary to be effective curriculum leaders? I evaluated the professional education core requirements teacher education programs with an elementary education focus offered at public and private, practitioner-focused colleges, and universities located in the North-Central Midwest. Descriptions of required courses for each program were evaluated for evidence of inclusion of curriculum theory and/or educational foundations in program requirements.

For the purposes of this study, curriculum theory content was assumed present in the class if the course description reflected coverage of philosophic, socio-political, or historical content as it relates to curriculum development or design. This assumption was applied with care due to the limitations created by the nature of the catalog course description content. Course descriptions are generally limited by available catalog space. As such, descriptions do not provide for full disclosure of the actual content nor of the depth of coverage of identified topics. Despite this limitation, the public descriptions contained in undergraduate catalogues reflect the foci of the course as perceived by each department and, therefore, can be interpreted as representative of what is considered valued content or curriculum. Course descriptions that focused on issues of diversity or education in a pluralistic society without clear connection to curriculum development or design were not included in the study findings. Similarly, courses described as emphasizing learning, psychological development, or instructional strategies were also ignored. The rationale for limiting the scope of descriptions as indicated above reflects my guiding argument that effective curriculum leadership requires a firm understanding of historical, philosophical,

and socio-political educational contexts. On the surface, teacher preparation programs seem to include preparation in the field of curriculum, but it is my contention that in actuality, most teacher preparation focuses almost exclusively in the realm of technical practices associated with the selection, ordering, and presentation of content. While I agree that such technical knowledge and skill is central to teaching practice, it is not representative of curriculum expertise nor is it adequate preparation for curriculum leaders. Similarly, though substantial knowledge of issues associated with education in our pluralistic and complex society is also essential to effective curricular leadership and knowledge of diverse needs of learners based upon individual or group characteristics or experiences is important, it is, at best, indirectly associated with curricular design. In and of itself, completion of general, overview courses in educational foundations, multicultural or classroom diversity do not provide adequate preparation to understand the socio-political aspects of curriculum necessary for effective leadership.

Methods

Initial identification of possible subject programs involved review of college program lists available from national publications including the *US News and World Report*. From the pool of potential schools, 30 schools that offered elementary licensure at the undergraduate level were given preliminary review. Study subject schools included those with clearly articulated required courses for each degree program. Schools with vague or highly personalized program requirements were rejected, as were those that offered post-baccalaureate initial licensure. A final study group of 20 schools was selected for inclusion in the study. Schools included private and public universities or colleges from the upper Midwestern states of Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan.

Program requirement data were collected from websites and online course catalogue program and course descriptions. The number of required courses that focused specifically on curriculum theory or educational foundations (i.e., educational history, sociology, or policy) was identified for each program. Course titles and catalog descriptions were evaluated to determine specific curricular content. Qualitative and quantitative analysis of program requirements were completed.

Findings

Review of required courses for an elementary education credential offered at the undergraduate level demonstrated a wide range of professional education credits. Schools were found to require as few as 20 and as many as 45 credits of non-field experience, educational professional core course work. Fourteen of 20 (i.e., 70%) included a requirement of a single course, typically 3 credits, in educational foundations that covered historical, philosophic, and socio-political aspects or issues. Only one school required two courses (i.e., 5 credits of the required core of 35) focused on foundational content. Foundation course descriptions at several schools included references to educational theory relative to learning, objectives, or processes of education. Course names included *Foundations of American Education*, *School and Society*, or *Education in a Pluralistic Society*.

Courses that referred to curriculum in the title generally failed to demonstrate attention or clear reference to curriculum theory within associated catalog descriptions. The majority of such courses referred to instructional techniques or strategies and focused on classroom or lesson organization and planning. The following is an example of a description of such a course.

. . . comprehensive overview of knowledge base and competencies required of all teachers. Emphasis is placed on the constructs of learning, models of communication and collaboration as well as models of reflection and self-assessment. The specific foci are the components of curriculum and various models of teaching (Course Description, Online Undergraduate Catalog, Private College, Wisconsin)

Only five of all required courses across the 20 subject schools had catalog descriptions that suggested the course content included focused coverage of curriculum theory or theory related to curriculum design, but none actually used the phrase “curriculum theory.” The course description for one of these classes found in the undergraduate online catalog for a public university in Minnesota read as follows: “Consideration

of historical, theoretical & educational perspective on curriculum development and practice selecting, organizing and developing curriculum units and writing lesson plans.” Another example from a different public university in Minnesota included the phrase “principles of curriculum formation” followed by “including writing objectives, unit planning and daily lesson planning.” The course that demonstrated the strongest evidence of content reflective of the concept of curriculum theory was found in the online undergraduate catalog at a public university in Michigan. The description from that data source reads: “The concept of curriculum and its relationship to differing philosophies of education and styles of teaching. The instruction process and multiple teaching strategies examined and applied through lesson planning and demonstration” [sic].

Careful reading of all relevant course descriptions from the undergraduate catalogs for the 20 subject schools failed to demonstrate clear indication that undergraduate students majoring in elementary education are provided with more than a marginal exposure to the historical, philosophical, or socio-political aspects of education. Courses with titles like *Curriculum and Methods* or *Methods of Elementary Education* may refer to curriculum, but are clearly focused on classroom planning and instruction. Curriculum theory as a unique theoretical field within education or as a coherent focus of course content was not evident in the majority of subject schools.

Discussion

Longevity of topical discourse aside, assertions that the role of curriculum leader is an appropriate one for teachers are not well supported. Research on disposition and knowledge suggests that while teachers may respond positively to activities associated with classroom instruction, they do not have ambitions toward assumption of a leadership role in the curriculum development process at a building or district level. My own small study of the preparation of teachers for such roles supports the findings by others that teachers generally lack the requisite knowledge to be truly effective designers of comprehensive curricula. Based upon literature and the findings of the study described here, assignment of teachers to curriculum leadership positions, if done at all, should be done cautiously and only in the presence of evidence that he or she has the comprehensive knowledge required.

Fullan (1993) asserts that education “change is too important to leave to the experts” and that individuals (i.e., teachers) must initiate action to change the conditions within their schools (p. 39). Such a position is problematic at best, as it fails to acknowledge the complexity of educational reform including that associated with curriculum determination. Moreover, such positions potentially undermines the field of education as it negates the importance of theoretical knowledge by practioners. If, as educational reform literature suggests, all members of a school community must be change-agents (Fullan, 1993), then all professionals must have the comprehensive knowledge level currently restricted to “experts” housed within higher education. Curriculum decision-making is a time consuming and complex task that requires substantial depth and breadth of understanding of the educational enterprise including the relationships and influences that drive policy and practice (Griffin, 1990). As such, curriculum leadership requires specific, focused, and advanced education.

The findings of this study and others documented in the literature confirm that most teachers do not have the comprehensive knowledge, nor the desire, to meet the demands of effective curriculum leadership. If teachers are to successfully fulfill the role of curriculum leaders, then current models of teacher training must be restructured to provide them the relevant theoretical knowledge currently lacking in the general teaching population. Change in the curriculum within teacher preparation is fundamental to the development in not only the skills and knowledge relative to the task of curriculum leadership, but the perceptions of teachers that such a role is not only appropriate but one they can successfully fulfill.

Suggestions for Change

Development of teacher leaders who can engage in meaningful curriculum development and decision-making is essential to creating schools that offer all students comprehensive academic preparation through authentic and engaging curricula. Current models of teacher education need to be adjusted to provide preservice educators adequate knowledge of curriculum theory and critical pedagogy such that these teachers may understand curriculum at the deeper level necessary to make decisions beyond the classroom level. To this end, I offer the following suggestions.

In the best-case scenario, teacher preparation programs would offer all candidates a nine semester hour sequence of courses that would provide a firm understanding of educational foundations. This sequence should begin with a survey course of educational history, policy, and practices with attention to the complexity of educating our large, pluralistic society. The second course should focus on the psychology and cognitive processing associated with learning to provide candidates with more than a general understanding of psychology and its application to educational planning. The final course in this proposed sequence should offer a focused study of curriculum theories and critical pedagogy to provide candidates with the basis from which to create a personal philosophy that will inform their curricular decisions beyond the technical aspects of instructional design, delivery, and assessment. Such course content will provide candidates with the depth of knowledge of curriculum necessary to approach decision-making with an eye toward social justice and equity of opportunity.

Given the demands and oversight of teacher credential authorities in State Department of Education, credit restrictions of university and college systems, and accreditation board expectations, adding nine credits to teacher preparation programs may be an impossibility for many. In such situations, the content knowledge of curricular theory and critical pedagogy should be incorporated into methods courses with the caveats that (a) the content is given adequate, focused attention and rigorous study necessary for development of deep understanding by candidates, and (b) faculty teaching these classes has adequate expertise in these areas to accurately present, support, interpret, and assess the learning of this content. Although this is not the best solution, it offers greater potential for development of this essential knowledge in teacher candidates than do the current operating models.

Finally, it is important to recognize and address arguments that teacher knowledge reflects a complex and lengthy acquisition process that is not completed within academic settings (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Darling-Hammond, Bullmaster & Cobb, 1995; Wilson & Demetriou, 2007). As such, professional development in the area of curriculum theory and critical pedagogy for in-service educators needs greater attention and should be supported to the fullest. To this end, professional development activities of sustained duration which allow focused, rigorous, and reflective study of curricular issues, theories, and critical pedagogy should be offered to all working professional educators.

Conclusion

Given the complexity of the problem, identification of a singular cause for the failure of comprehensive implementation of teacher as curriculum leader is not reasonable. However, the hypothesis that successful and sustained teacher-directed curriculum decision-making fails, in part, due to limitations in the conceptual knowledge of the teacher placed in such leadership roles is worthy of further consideration. It is unreasonable, if not unfair, to place teachers into roles for which they do not have the prerequisite competencies. If teachers are to be put into such leadership roles, they must have a deeper understanding of education as a whole than is currently evident through evaluation of teacher preparation program content and standards.

Although most teacher preparation programs address curriculum, it is done through a very limited lens and typically framed in terms of “lesson planning” at the classroom level. Lesson planning is not curriculum planning and while knowledge of the former may be essential to classroom success, it is inadequate for effective more comprehensive organizational curricular decision-making. If the

expectation is that teachers will be placed in the role of Curriculum Leader, whether in their grade level teams or on building or district level committees, it is essential that they have the depth of knowledge required to fulfill that role effectively. Support for the acquisition of that knowledge must begin in teacher preparation programs and continue through professional development activities. With such support, the sustained educational reform and improved student outcomes hypothesized to be possible when teachers take meaningful roles in organization level decision making may come to fruition.

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