

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 author is both an educator and administrator and the intent of this paper is to provide other educators with a deeper understanding of the potential for increased learning when the student is included in curriculum design. In order to support this position, the author reviews how theorists from various curriculum perspectives have historically recognized the absence of student voice in curriculum planning. It is not an exhaustive analysis, but rather an overarching review of the work of certain significant theorists from the past hundred years. Building from this review, a case is presented giving reasons why students should be included in the process. To bolster the philosophical argument in favor of student voice, specific research based evidence is reviewed which 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.

Curriculum theory is a broad, complex, and diverse field of study. Over the last hundred years the role of curriculum, and who should be involved in its construction has regularly been debated. However one voice has been marginalized in the debate. This group of silenced stakeholders is the students. Considering that all curriculum is constructed and implemented for the education and growth of students, their omission from the process is concerning. While the questions of how to teach students and what to teach students have been asked for decades, they have seldom been asked of the students themselves. An awareness of problems involving a lack of student voice have been noted by some earlier curricular theorists, however it is only more recently that the concept of student participation in curriculum development has begun to be actively pursued in the curriculum field.

It is this expanding role of the student that I wish to focus on. Both as an educator and an administrator I see incredible potential in empowering our students. I believe that student involvement in the curriculum planning process is a means of improving student learning. I will briefly review some historic perspectives on curriculum theory that draw attention to the need for student voice. These early arguments concerning student participation will be built on to present reasons why students should become active partners in the curriculum planning process. This argument will incorporate both philosophical perspectives, and successes that are being witnessed in current participatory design projects. To balance out this discussion it will be necessary to also present some of the barriers to incorporating student voice. I will conclude by considering where education in Alberta currently falls in the spectrum of student involvement,

and what possibilities exist for increased student involvement in my own practice as an educator and administrator.

What is student voice and participatory design?

Student voice is a relatively new phrase in the educational field. There have been historical examples of student involvement in educational decision making, but it is only in the last ten years that the concept of actively including students in school planning has gained ground (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). Although there are multiple definitions of student voice, in this paper it will be considered to be the systematic inclusion and empowerment of students in the decision making processes of schools (Mitra and Gross, 2009). It is important to note that this paper will not focus on student voice in all the facets of school decision making, but rather will focus specifically on the role students can play in regards to 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 will include any initiative that has as its basis the involvement of the end user in the design process (Konings, Brand-Gruwel, Saskia and van Merriernboer, 2010). It should be noted that throughout this paper the term student voice and student participation will be used interchangeably. In both cases the term will refer specifically to the concept of student involvement in curriculum planning and implementation at the class, school, or provincial level.

What Insights Have Previous Curricular Theorists Provided on Student Voice?

In order to place current practice in perspective it is important to review the historic role of the student in curriculum development. Since this is a brief overview, rather than an in depth

analysis, I have been selective in which curriculum theorists I touch upon. It is not the intent of this review to rank curriculum theory perspectives as to their incorporation of students in the discussion, but rather to give an overview of how different theorists have touched on the concept of student participation. As one of the founders of modern educational thought regarding curriculum it is appropriate to begin this discussion by focusing on the work of R.W. Tyler. His approach to curriculum is quite rigid. He proposes a hierarchical structure where all curriculum can be addressed through 4 simple steps. The position presented is that curriculum is constructed using these steps, and then is applied to the students in the classroom (Tyler, 1975). However, even in this traditionalist perspective, the need for student empowerment in curriculum planning is apparent. Tyler (1975) recognized that students needed to 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)

While Tyler's perspective on curriculum theory has been influential for much of the twentieth century, in the last few decades various scholars have challenged his views. An influential Canadian scholar, T.T. Aoki addresses specifically the need for consideration of the curriculum as it is lived out in the classroom. In order to move beyond the position of curriculum as plan, Aoki emphasizes the importance of educators shifting the perspective of themselves and others. By shifting perspective and language,

education can move towards a curriculum that has room for the “otherness of others” (Aoki, 1993, p. 266).

Paulo Freire, another influential curriculum theorist brings forward similar concerns to Aoki. He is critical of a common approach to education, one which he describes as a banking system, wherein the students are not perceived to have knowledge of their own, but must instead have it bestowed upon them by educators (Freire, 1993). He instead puts forward a new libertarian perspective, one in which students play an active role. The reason for ‘being’ of education, in Freire’s view, is 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 education, Freire argues that education must involve the posing of problem solving questions that incorporate the consciousness and world view of the learner.

The final theorist to be reviewed, is also perhaps the nearest to asking questions specific to student participatory action. This may in part be a product of being the most current theorist in the field, as he had the opportunity to benefit from, and build upon the work of the earlier theorists. This theorist, E.W. Eisner (2001), has written more directly about the role of the student in curriculum development. His questions grow out of a reflection regarding how factors such as external assessments influence a classroom teacher’s decisions regarding curriculum. Often these external sources can weigh more heavily on decisions that are made in the classroom, then the needs or desires of the students. While reviewing this topic he asks the question, ““what opportunities do students have to formulate their own purposes and to design ways to achieve them?” (Eisner, 2001, p.371). This is indeed an exciting inquiry. Before exploring some current

examples of educational initiatives that apply the vary opportunities Eisner hypothesizes about, it is first necessary to elaborate on why student voice should be included.

Why should students be included in curriculum development?

This question needs to be answered on two levels. First, the general arguments for the rightful place of student voice in curriculum development need to be considered. Secondly, specific data needs to be provided that can substantiate the claim that increased student voice has tangible benefits in student engagement and achievement. The theorists reviewed earlier in this paper provide some of the broad perspectives on why students should have a voice in curriculum theory. A common theme that came out of the historical review was the sense that student engagement increased when their voices were heard. But it is important to the strength of the argument in favor of student voice in curriculum theory to go one step further and seek a link between engagement and academic achievement. Although research in this area is relatively new, there have been positive links made between engagement and learning. A broad based university level analysis found that “student engagement is linked positively to desirable learning outcomes such as critical thinking and grades” (Carini, Kuh, and Klein, 2006, p. 23).

As student participation continues to gain attention in the field of curriculum theory, new arguments have added to the historical concerns about the lack of voice for the learner. One theorist points out that, “through mass education, the child was turned into a passive, docile recipient of adult knowledge” (Thompson, 2009, p. 763). Another philosophical argument in favor of student participation lies in the basis of education. Ultimately, student learning is consistently put forward as the core, or focus, of

education. Therefore if the goal is to work to improve the outcome of schooling, the learner should help form curriculum production. This perspective of teamwork and common goals has already shown dividends in work settings, but only recently is beginning to find its way into schools (Levin, 2000).

The consequence of not involving the learner is another factor in supporting the argument for student voice. Students have a strong understanding of process and structure. If they do not feel connected to the curriculum or objectives of a course, they will become their own barrier to learning through disruptive practice (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Teachers also can't really know what criticisms or struggles students may have with the instructional approaches used. This is because a key factor in instruction is the perception of the instruction by the student. If students are not given an opportunity to communicate their perception, and guide instructional change, achievement will suffer. (Konings, et al., 2010).

Over the last decade the concept of participatory action design involving students has become more common. A review of certain school based projects provides compelling data for why students should be involved. One study tracked a student design model in a middle school science class (Crawford, Krajcik, and Marx, 1999). From their data analysis emerged results that showed increased collaborative interaction among students when they initiated the tasks, increased group productivity when students had a sense of ownership, and a strong sense of responsibility on the part of the students when the process involved answering their own research questions. From their research it also became apparent 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” (Crawford et al., 1999, p. 712).

Another research project on student voice in the learning process analyzed student and teacher response to “the principle and experience of consultation about learning” (Thompson, 2009, p. 671). This study highlighted the fact that the teachers play a significant role in the process, and that educators have different perspectives as to what student participation includes. Thompson (2009) divides educators involved in participatory design into three groups: proactive consultation, managerial consultation, and constrained consultation. The student feedback showed that they emotionally valued the fact that teachers were considering their views; teachers in the proactive and managerial groups were found to be more genuine in recognizing student input than those in the constrained group. Students showed an awareness that the process involved a trust relationship forming between teacher and student. When student teacher interaction became less genuine, or all encompassing, the sense of change because of the interaction decreased as well (Thompson, 2009).

What are Some Barriers to Including Student Voice in Curriculum Design?

As is often the case when challenging the status quo, there are barriers to overcome. First of all the concept of student participation needs to be clearly defined, and the expectations for both the student and the teacher need to be understood by all those involved in the change process. Foundational to this joint understanding needs to be the recognition by both groups that the learner is “responsible and capable” (Thompson, 2009, p. 674). If this isn’t the premise, the process breaks down and teacher student

interaction becomes controlled and teacher driven. When student voice is introduced in an artificial manner it can actually be harmful to the school environment. This is especially true if there is a history of students being treated with disrespect. Insincere approaches to student teacher partnership will lead to students becoming disengaged and alienated (Mitra & Gross, 2009). Also, the current educational system isn't designed to equip teachers entering the profession with the necessary philosophical understanding and coaching skills to create opportunities for student teacher partnership. While pre-service teachers have been involved in such partnerships at the university level, these same teachers reported having difficulty constructing communities of shared responsibility in their own classrooms (Crawford et al., 1999).

However, the barriers to participatory design are not only caused by a lack of buy in by the educational system, or by a poor communication of the expectations. In some cases the concerns are raised by the learners themselves. One of the reasons for this is that students have become comfortable with an educational system that constrains and guides them through a process based on external expectations (Albers, 2009). The increased time that it took to be involved with the process as an active participant was another barrier. Students admit that they have become used to a system of surface learning, and that the opportunity to be involved in plotting a deeper course of study was time consuming (Albers, 2009; Crawford et al., 1999).

Conclusion: A Consideration of Student Voice in Alberta Education Today, and Some Thoughts of How This Research May Influence my Practice.

After gaining an understanding of the historical perspective of the role of the student in curriculum theory, constructing an argument in favor of participatory action, and reviewing some of the potential barriers to introducing this change to curriculum development, I'd like to end by considering the status of the student role in curriculum in Alberta. As an educator I feel it is important to frame the theoretical position of student voice in the context of education in Alberta today. It is difficult to assess what is occurring in classrooms around the province, so I've focused in this section on what Alberta Education, as a broad controller of curricular change, has put forward regarding student participation.

I am encouraged by a noticeable shift in the Ministry of Education over the last few years towards creating opportunities for student involvement in the planning process. What is particularly visible is the recognition that student engagement is valuable. Alberta Education has even made this a specific outcome focus for the most recent cycle of its Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (Alberta Education, 2008). Although this is a necessary step towards furthering the role of students 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 towards this increased student participation. As part of the "Inspiring Education" initiative student focus groups were included as stakeholders in the process. Most notably Alberta Education constructed a website, entitled "Speak Out", which gives students the opportunity to express their views on the future of education in Alberta. Unfortunately their participation was not used to create a template for future curricular planning. Although student engagement is heavily emphasized in the report put forward by the

steering committee for “Inspiring Education”, active student participation is not (Alberta Education, 15). In order to take the next step, curriculum planners in Alberta need to bring student voice specifically into the curriculum planning discussion.

So where does this leave me as an educator and administrator? I feel more solidified in my perspective towards student participation. The review of various projects helped make the process of including students more tangible. Alberta Education’s push for student engagement also equips me to better find opportunities at the school level for incorporating student voice. Alberta Education’s direction allows me to broaden staff perspectives on the role of the student in a genuine manner by tying it to our AISI project and other staff professional development opportunities. I’ve also taken my first tentative steps as an educator by structuring my upcoming English course to begin with a curriculum analysis. Through this approach I hope to empower students to better understand the expectations of the course, and also give them opportunity to influence what material is brought into the classroom, and what educational approaches are used to provide instruction. It is only a cautious first step on the road to more fully recognizing the students as active participants in the learning process, but I’m excited to begin creating an educational space where theory and practice can interact.

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