Elementary Practicum Project – Principal Interviews

Michael Ricke

South Dakota State University

American Philosopher and Education Reformer John Dewey once said "The real process of education should be the process of learning to think through the application of real problems" (Quotes Daddy, 2014). As I started this practicum project, I was curious to find out the curriculum philosophies of building principals of schools that were similar in size to the school district that I currently teach in. After spending a lot of time reading about curriculum philosophy and curriculum issues that exist in schools all across the United States, I was curious if any of my interviewees would bring up any of the issues that we discussed as a class without me having to prompt them. I wondered if I would hear any of the "buzz words" from our readings and internet posts. Things like liberating curriculum, hidden curriculum, oppressive practices, common sense practices, and hegemony.

For my project, I interview three principals. Kristi Nelson is a first year principal at Tea Elementary School in Tea, SD. Kristi taught in both elementary schools and middle schools for 25 years before taking a job as principal in 2013. Darren Ellwein is in his first year as principal at Harrisburg Middle School. Prior to moving to Harrisburg, Mr. Ellwein was the principal at Lennox Middle School for 8 years. Darin Eich has been the elementary school principal in Lennox for the last 3 years. Prior to taking the job at Lennox Elementary School, Mr. Eich was the principal at Worthing Elementary School for 6 years which is also located in the Lennox School District. I chose my interviewees because, first of all, I knew all three of them personally through different activities. Secondly, and more importantly, I chose them because they had various levels of experience. Mrs. Nelson was in her first year as principal and had no prior experience as a principal. Mr. Ellwein was also in his first year at his current position, but brought 8 years of experience with him from previous principal jobs. Mr. Eich, while only at his current position for 3 years, had been an elementary school principal in that same school district

for the last 10 years. My thoughts were, that those interviewee's with more years of experience might be more in tune with both their own philosophies of curriculum and also their school/school districts philosophies and policies on curriculum.

The Interviews

Interview Question #1

My first question to each of the interviewees was "How do you define curriculum?" All three of the interviewees had different responses to the question. Mrs. Nelson responded by saying "Curriculum is not only the subjects and material taught, but the combined experiences within the school setting. I also feel my school's culture is embedded within this combination of experiences." Mr. Eich said "To me curriculum is the resources used to cover standards." Mr. Ellwein's response was "A device that can drive instruction or provide a framework to enhance the learning of students."

I found it interesting that the principal with the least experience had, to me, the best definition. Mrs. Nelson was the only one of three to touch on the idea that curriculum should include the experiences of students and the culture of the school as all playing a part in the school's curriculum. As Null (2011) writes, "Curriculum is about taking a subject, preparing it for classroom use, and following through so that it makes a lasting impact on students" (Page 7). Mrs. Nelson seemed to understand that experiences that students have within the curriculum is just as important as the material that is being presented to them. Curriculum is the heart of education. It is not only what is being taught, but it is also combination of thought, action, and purpose. Curriculum needs to address the "why" of each subject matter being taught (Null, 2011).

Interview Question #2

My second question focused on the school district itself. I asked each of my interviewees "What is your school districts philosophy on curriculum?" It was interesting to hear the responses of the two principals with the most experience. Mr. Eich simply wrote "The philosophy for curriculum in our district is to keep it current with today's standards." Mr. Ellwein was even vaguer when he responded "Find curriculum to help teachers and align standards." Once again Mrs. Nelson had the most thought provoking response when she said "When choosing curriculum materials we consider best practices as well as those that are research based and proven. We look for curriculum that will both engage students and make them better thinkers and problem solvers. We do not have anything per se in writing that I am aware of, but our adoption process encompasses guidelines that include various stakeholders such as teachers, administration, school board, parents and community members."

I was really impressed by Mrs. Nelson's response. Her inclusion of the terms and ideas of "best practices," "researched based," "engage students," and "problem solvers" leads me to believe that the school at which Mrs. Nelson is principal has a pragmatic approach to curriculum. The pragmatic approach believes that reality is constantly changing and that we learn best through applying our experiences and thoughts to problems, as they arise. Teaching in a pragmatic curriculum is focused on hands-on problem solving, experimenting, and projects - often having students work in groups. In a pragmatic curriculum, there is no absolute truth – truth is what works in each situation (Null, 2011).

Mrs. Nelson also touched on the fact that her school district's adoption process includes various stakeholder like teachers, administrators, school board members, parents, and community members. I thought it was great to see that her particular school district involves so many of the stakeholders in adoption process. As Null (2011) writes "In a democracy…the number of

stakeholders must expand. This expansion should take place not only because curriculum is improved when deliberation takes place at all levels, but also because democracy requires that all citizens have input into what is taught" (pg. 24) It is important for people to discuss, argue, interpret, and draw conclusions about curriculum and how it should look for the children of each particular community. While increasing the number of stakeholders who are involved in the process can make the process more difficult because you are working with many more idea and opinions, it also increases buy-in and accountability because there more people who have a vested interest in the curriculum being a success.

A lack of transparency and openness are two of Diane Ravitch's biggest reasons for why the Common Core State Standards shouldn't have been adopted and enacted when they were. She argues that, from the outset, the Common Core standards were marked by the absence of public participation, transparency, or educator participation (Strauss, 2014). I don't know if the CCSS are a good thing or not – that is yet to be determined. However, I do feel that they were implemented too quickly and without enough input by those who are affected the most by the standards – that being teachers, principals, school administrators, and parents. As Ravitch (2014) writes "In a democracy, transparency is crucial, because transparency and openness builds trust. Those crucial ingredients were lacking" (pg. 1).

Interview Question #3

My third question involved the individual role of each of my interviewees in the development of the curriculum. I asked them "What is your role in curriculum development?" For this question, I got my most my most in depth responses. Mr. Ellwein responded "I meet with our curriculum director at least twice a month to discuss the needs of in the areas of curriculum as well as current classroom use of curriculum. I also play a part in the adoption of

the curriculum. I review and recommend adoptions." As I read Mr. Ellwein's response, I got the

feeling that curriculum development was more of a checklist item for him. His matter of fact

response of "we meet twice a month" sounds to me like meeting with the curriculum director is

something he is required to do, so he does it. This attitude goes against the ideas discussed in

our readings. If we want to have a liberating curriculum, we cannot reduce curriculum just a

syllabus or a list of topics that are divorced from meaning, purpose, and humanity. Teachers

must open students up to new possibilities within the boundaries of tradition, and administrators

must take an active role that teachers are fulfilling this duty and that they have the resources

necessary to do so.

   Mr. Eich answered the question like this. "My role is to support the teachers in their use

of the curriculum and to make sure they have the materials needed to cover standards. We have

a curriculum director who forms committees to look at various companies and to adopt the one

deemed to help our students the most in understanding the standards." I like the way uses the

word "support" in his answer as this is a big part of what a principal needs to do. However, in

order to give proper support, it is important that a principal have a basic understanding of the

curriculum and what tools and resources (including technology) are needed to see that the

curriculum is implemented in the appropriate manner. A school principal needs to hold the

teachers accountable for using their curriculum resources at their disposal to effectively cover all

of the content standards in their respective curriculum area (Eutopia Staff, 2008).

   Mrs. Nelson talked about the teamwork approach that they use at her school in regards to

curriculum development. She responded "We have a district curriculum director who provides

information and follows district adoption timelines and guidelines, oversees the budget for this

area, coordinates and facilitates staff professional development and aids staff in developing

essential guides which include our standards, SLOs, and assessments. As a district

administrator, I am very much a part of this as well, working closely with the curriculum

director, especially when it concerns my building." All three of my interviewees work in a

district that employees a curriculum director. That does not, however, exempt them from the

process of curriculum development, adoption, and implementation. Virtues of teamwork,

deliberation, persistence, wisdom, justice, honesty, moderation, compassion, and honesty are all

key components of a curriculum and all breathe life into the curriculum development process

(Null, 2011).

Interview Question #4

The fourth question in my interview revolve around the curriculum development process

at each school. I asked them "What is your school's policy on the adoption of new curriculum?"

The responses to this question were very similar. All three of the interviewees talked about the

fact that their school has a "cycle" that they follow in regards to curriculum adoption. The

processes varied from heavy investigation and analysis of the curriculum by teachers,

administrators, and other stake holders before any adoption took place, to very limited

investigation and analysis.

One example of a more simplistic approach can be seen in Mr. Ellwein statement about

the adoption of new curriculum at his school. He simply stated that they "bring in companies to

discuss options; teachers fill out evaluation forms and select curriculum." This simplistic idea of

curriculum adoption is what allows the "hidden curriculum" that Michael Apple talks about in

his book *Ideology and Curriculum* to enter into the equation. The lack of oversight and

investigation of the curriculum can lead to certain biases and hidden agenda's being brought into

the adoption process by teachers, administrators, or other invested parties. The hidden

curriculum is introduced when educators – whether intentionally or unintentionally – convey

certain norms, values, and beliefs into their curriculum (Apple, 2004). When this happens,

students start learning more from what is being "implied" by the curriculum than what is actually

being "taught" in the classroom.

Interview Question #5

For my last question, I asked the interviewee's "How does diversity impact the

curriculum at your school. The responses of two of those I interview were about what I

expected. Mrs. Nelson responded by saying "We are a fairly homogenous school, so this has not

been a concern up to now. Most curriculum series already seem to address this issue." Mr. Eich

wrote "With primarily Caucasian students, diversity doesn't have a major impact on curriculum

adoption." While both of these responses only look at the idea of "diversity" in terms of race

and color, and ignore the thought of curriculum being oppressive in terms of gender, sexual

orientation, and for students with disabilities, they are the kind of responses that I expected to see

– the same kind of response I would have given before taking this class.

The response that was the most surprising for me out of this entire interviewing process

was when Mr. Ellwein stated the following in how diversity impacts his school's curriculum. He

said "We have diversity but the topic does not come into play when selecting curriculum." I was

utterly shocked by this pretty matter-of-fact statement. It is one thing live in a very traditional,

middle class, and conservative communities where everyone's sense of "normal" is similar. But

to recognize that you are a very diverse school and to admit that it is not taken into consideration

when looking your school's curriculum seems unacceptable. Schools and school teachers are not

"color blind." It is vital that we not only recognizing the differences between people of different

races, but openly talking about it, acknowledge it, and trying to understand it (de Freitas &

McAuley, 2008). Trying to take diversity and "sweep it under the rug" is what leads to the biased and oppressive teaching that exists in schools throughout the country.

Summary and Reaction

This was a very interesting experience for me. I know each of the people that I interviewed one a personal level so I truly feel that each of them was being genuine with their responses. I don't think it is a coincidence that the principal that is in her first year in administration (Kristi Nelson) seemed to have the most well thought out answers and seemed to convey the most passion for curriculum with her responses. The "veteran" administrators were much more matter-of-fact with their responses – almost robotic. Most of their responses seemed to be generic responses that had been spit out over and over in response to similar questions.

We are in a time of great change in education. Common Core State Standards (CCSS), Smarter Balanced Testing, Danielson Framework of Teacher Evaluation, Cognitively Guided Instruction (CGI), and Student Learning Objectives (SLO's) are some of the issues that schools all over South Dakota and all over the United States are dealing with right now. With all of this change going on, I think it is a great time for schools to take an in depth look at their curriculum and what EXACTLY they are teaching their students. It is time to get out of our comfort zone and talk about the gorilla in the room – the idea that we are holding some of our students back and setting others up for failure. As James Burns (2013) writes, "To not reflect on normative and discriminatory practices and precepts in curriculum and pedagogy serves to de facto support these practices and to position many young men as abject and marginalize them" (pg. 125).

References

Apple, M. W. (2004). *Ideology and Curriculum.* New York: Routledge.

Burns, J. (2013). The Big Stories and the Little Stories. In *The Interdependence of Teaching and Learning* (pp. 109-126). Information Age Publishing.

de Freitas, E., & McAuley, A. (2008). Teaching for Diversity by Troubling Whiteness: Strategies for Classrooms in Isolated White Communities. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 429-442.

Eutopia Staff. (2008, March 16). Why Integrate Technology into the Curriculum?: The Reasons Are Many. United States of America.

Null, W. (2011). *Curriculum: From theory to practice.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Quotes Daddy. (2014, February 4). *Quotes Daddy*. Retrieved from John Dewey Quotes: http://www.quotesdaddy.com/author/John+Dewey

Strauss, V. (2014, January 18). *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from Everything you need to know about Common Core — Ravitch: http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2014/01/18/everything-you-need-to-know-about-common-core-ravitch/