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Ending Where We Began

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The world, the people in it, and my relationship to both have always fascinated me. This interest in humanity motived me as a student, paved my path to teaching, and informs my decisions as an educator. I always believed the core purpose of school was to provide space and resources for one to interact with society and discover how each informs the other. What schools teach, who decides what is taught, and how effectiveness is evaluated should be grounded in this objective.

  This belief remains after delving deep into the historical analysis of curriculum Flinders and Thorton (2017) outline, the critical look at policies that shape our education system Darling Hammond (2010) and Ravitch (2010) call attention to, and theories about the ideologies that drive our educations system Sleeter (2013) presents. What has changed is my understanding of where my belief comes from, how it connects to theory and policy, and what it implies for my future as a teacher-researcher.

**What should schools teach – what knowledge is of most worth?**

I have always cited influence from my home and early childhood school experience as the primary source for where my answer to this question comes from. In each of these settings I experienced student-centered education that prioritized going beyond acquiring facts and used content to prompt discussion, interaction, and reflection. Analyzing foundations of curriculum and tracking its trajectory over time enlightened me to how the experiences that shaped my beliefs about school are largely a product of foundational curriculum theories that continue to inform current practice.

As Flinders and Thorton state (2017) the need for curriculum was caused by rise to public access to education and since its inception thoughts have differed on what the public needs. Beginning with Dewey, I immediately recognized my beliefs in his creed that schools should not depart from natural process of an individual gradually learning how to join humanity through interaction and experiences (Dewey, 1929/2017). Contrarily, reading Bobbitt (1918/2017) and his idea that education should impart the skills needed to join workforce made me realize this is where the dominant school model derives from. What schools teach is characterized by his call to give society what it 'needs' instead of providing space, experience, and guidance for students to formulate their own values, goals, and skills.

Looking at these two scholars as contemporaries revealed the roots of the current divide in thinking I experience as a student and teacher. Elements of Dewey philosophy are evident in scholars that came after like Eisner (1967/2017) who believed in making space for spontaneous learning rather than adhering to objective. Conversely, Bobbitt principles are present in works of Tyler (1949/2017) who argued for the need of objectives that would ensure public learned necessary skills. Examining the way future curriculum theories built on the foundations of Dewey and Bobbitt revealed how the debate about what knowledge is most worthy has always been central to how curriculum is formed and implemented.

Reading these differing theories throughout our history alongside analysis of the current state of education through Sleeter (2013) and Darling Hammond (2015) exposed that despite the diversity in curriculum theory, the Bobbitt aligned top-down model consistently prevails in our schools. Both texts underscore how our system focuses on training students for their designated role in an institution rather than give equal opportunity for all students to develop the type of creative and critical thinking skills that are necessary to thrive in the new ‘flat world’ in which students will need to be prepared for jobs ‘that don’t exist yet’ (Darling-Hammond 2010). Sleeter (2013) declares the reason for this is tension between the democratic ideals we claim and the corporate mentality we enforce. Her explanation of these ideologies caused me to realize what I found was most worth learning countered what overall system historically and currently supports and in many cases, enforces.

Darling-Hammond (2010) deepened this realization by discussing how in general our schools are falling behind in their ability to prepare our students for a more globalized future. She explains that other developing countries such as Finland, South Korea, and Singapore have restructured curriculums to align with the deeper critical thinking skills needed in modern society. Meanwhile, the United States remains faithful to a “transmission-oriented” curriculum that focuses on simultaneously mandating and preparing students for their “lane” or role in society. This antiquated model perpetuates inequity and hinders student ability to analyze, create, and reflect.

Foundational curriculum theorists, the ideologies Sleeter outlines, and the critical look at our current system Darling Hammond shares showcases our system answers this what should schools teach question with theories that promote social engineering. This indicates the corporate emphasis on training eclipse the democratic ideal of educating. I previously had a simple understanding of my personal beliefs about what schools should teach, but now the historical and theoretical foundations of my beliefs and how they differ from the system I teach in are clear.

**Who should decide what (and how) schools teach?**

The questions what should schools teach and who should decide what they teach are intertwined. The answers to each of these questions inform each other and derive from either a democratic or corporate ideology. My belief that the knowledge worth teaching is determined by the needs and interests of the learners correlates with my conviction that educators, students, and community should collectively decide what and how schools teach. It is clear now this is a democratic ideal that aligns with the rhetoric our education system uses, but stands in contrast to the reality it enforces.

Initially I did not see such a stark contrast between democratic rhetoric and reality. As Sleeter (2013) notes “because the US is actively exporting its conception of democracy to the world one might imagine its citizens have a robust conception of what democracy is, but that is not the case (p. 15).” I previously believed the narrative of democracy the U.S. promotes because I had a limited definition of democracy as the right to vote and majority rules principle. Woodruff (2005) as cited by Sleeter explicates a true democracy goes beyond this and embodies seven critical features. The most pertinent to education is the seventh one, “general education designed to equip citizens for participation.” Democratic educators make this principle a priority and teach students to form new ideas and arrive at new understandings about themselves and the world, while corporatocracy values production over free thought. These can be viewed merely as two different approaches, but as Sleeter (2013) explains through examination of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy, the corporatocracy ideology dominates. She asserts NCLB followed business model by mandating states set new standardized test aligned standards and change curriculum to ensure mastery of these new benchmarks.

This analysis gave context to my personal experiences having to negotiate my democratic ideals with business-like reality in which test scores are the top, if not the only, priority. Previously I understood this as a difference in philosophy between administration and myself, but now I realize what occurs in practice is a representation of our democratic rhetoric being overshadowed by corporate reality. Sleeter (2013) offers more examples of this through two examples of teachers, Rita and Nancy, who struggle to uphold their ideals within the system. These narratives reinforced the conclusion that my answer to the question of who should decide what schools teach is trumped by how our system answers that question. However, the accounts Rita and Nancy also revealed how despite a system that consistently exposes its belief that a few ‘experts’ should decide what schools teach, there are also many cases of individuals who believe in true democracy and strive to uphold that belief in the classroom. This analysis of tensions between democracy and corporatocracy and examples of teachers trying to uphold the former within the latter made me my thinking on this question evolve. I shifted from simplistic ideals to grounded understanding of where those ideals come from to a renewed sense of purpose to teach according to democratic ideals even when faced with corporate mandates. My answer to who should decide what and how schools teach is still a collective group of key stakeholders such as teachers, students, and parents. However, now it is evident that the ‘who’ in the question is a few individuals instead of a collective, but the ‘how’ creates an opportunity and a challenge for the community to decide on the education our citizens receive.

**How should the effectiveness of schools be evaluated?**

Those who decide what schools teach are also entrusted with deciding how schools are evaluated. Ravitch (2010) shows this by analyzing evolution NCLB and the publication A Nation at Risk (ANAR). Her critical look at these two initiatives show an initial attempt to make sure education was meeting needs of all students, was taken over and used to justify making standardized testing prime accountability measure. According to Ravitch (2010), ANAR was published to shed light on where our system was falling behind and propose that we redefine standards to address our weaknesses. Following this call, educators collaborated on history standards that prioritized the critical thinking skills Darling-Hammond (2010) asserts we need for the changing globalized world. Instead of continuing on this path, standards were deemed too liberal by the small group of politicians that have high power over what schools teach. The controversy caused standards to remain rooted in corporate ideology and consisted of the necessary skills needed for work.

Similarly, NCLB was started to address inequity in educational offerings but did so in a simplistic way that placed blame on low performing schools without looking deeper. The policy highlighted the achievement gap without addressing the lack of resources and opportunities that cause this disparity. Consequently, effectiveness was not regarding how well the system and schools remedy inequity. Instead, politicians and standardized testing companies found economic value in using a test as a determinant of success. As Ravitch (2010) explains, what could not be measured did not count. Both ANAR and NCLB paved the way for standardized assessment to arise as dominate measure of success and shows how the power to decide what schools teach extends to control over how teaching is measured.

Reflecting on ANAR and NCLB exposes how the way we measure school effectiveness grew increasingly narrow and focused on a bottom line. McNeill (2000/2017) illustrates the repercussions of this shortsightedness through chronology and critique of the standardized test, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). She shares how implementing this test caused schools to focus on achieving well on the test instead of evaluating the needs of students and measuring how well they meet those needs. Teacher tenure previously earned on merit and seniority was replaced by performance contracts measured by student test data. Teacher professional development became test preparation trainings. Curriculum became comprised of test-taking strategies and all this was championed by things like school pep rallies for the test.

The history of our current accountability system Ravitch offers supports the conclusion that the same few elites who decide what schools teach has power over how success is measured. The effects of this that McNeill details made me feel an urgent need to change how our effectiveness is measured. As I read more, that thought expanded to believe we need to not only change how we measure effectiveness, but also restructure our definition of effectiveness. The attention Noddings (2003/2017) puts on educational aims shifted my focus from accountability measures to asking what we want to hold ourselves accountable for. Noddings asks why happiness, health, and social skills are not an aim in education and calls for its inclusion in how we decide what we teach and how well we are teaching it. Instead of exclusive focus on content objectives, she proposes to need to include broader aims that consider the influence education has on the character of individuals and humanity.

While the ideas Noddings presents can seem purely idealistic. Darling Hammond (2010) offers examples of what can occur when systems restructure definitions of achievement and how to measure it. Her study of Connecticut and North Carolina serve as evidence that effectiveness and ability is not tied to test scores. When both states, with increasing minority populations, elevated teaching requirements, salary, and created their own assessments that monitored progress they experienced gains in NEAP scores. While Connecticut approached the issue with more emphasis on changing policy and North Carolina began with raising standards, both states took on education holistically by raising standards as well as opportunities and evaluating where they invested time and money. These states show how redefining achievement and collaborating on how to measure progress towards achievement can improve education in a way that is evident both quantitatively and qualitatively. The fact that these are isolated cases point to the refusal of the general system to make equity, student centered learning, and preparation for global society at the core of our definition of effectiveness. Just as individuals must come together to change who and how the curriculum is taught, they must also collaborate on how teaching and learning is measured.

Darling-Hammond shows how states can collectively improve flaws in the accountability system while Sleeter (2013) shows how individual teachers can offer alternative measures of success when they, as she states, teach boldly. She shares examples of first grade teacher Kathy and high school teacher Christy who made the development of student character as well as academic ability central to the definition of effectiveness instead of relying on a test to determine effectiveness. These teachers had to be bold enough to reject the corporate definition of success and redefine it for themselves and their students. While the effects of this are not as quantifiable as a standardized test, the narratives Sleeter shares show teachers have the power to change how effectiveness is defined and measured than they perceive.

Like Noddings, States presented by Darling-Hammond, and the teachers exhibited by Sleeter, we must ask what how we are preparing students to develop into informed, healthy, and happy individuals as well as participants in society instead of just tracking their ability to produce. After looking back at the insights offered from authors detailing the theories, history, and policy that define our education system I am left with a new understanding of the same principles I started with which has changed my goals as a teacher. I use to teach with the goal of becoming a master teacher, without reflecting on what mastery means. Now I have cut ties to mastery status and instead commit to engaging in an ongoing practice of teaching boldly with the objective of increasing access to quality democratic education through my daily practice in and outside of the classroom.

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