

Perspectives about Education and Curriculum Reforms: Why Education and Curriculum Reforms Need To Be a Continuous Process

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Abstract

A strange and chance encounter on the final night of my trip to Chicago, my first visit to that city, where I attend the second annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies, (AAACS) in 2003 gave birth to this paper. The paper intends to highlight some of the critical issues in the education and curriculum field not only inside the walls of our schools but outside them as well. Through the analysis of a conversation between two females, this paper discusses some prevailing perspectives about education and curriculum, the important role that parents should play in the education of their children and the significance of continuous education reforms. Conclusions are also drawn.

Introduction

It is amazing how much one can hear and learn about schools, education and curriculum while sitting alone and waiting to be served in a restaurant. Perhaps it is during these odd, unplanned moments that teachers reflect best on their pedagogical practices and get to know what, how to teach as they ruminate on their practices. This observation also becomes clear in Sandholtz (2002) article when she begins by posing questions. “Have you ever been to a party for teachers? What do they talk about? They talk about teaching.” This excerpt goes on to mention that teachers spend hours outside their formal work time to passionately talk about their teaching. I could not agree more with Sandholtz as I heard and observed such conversation occurring between a teacher and a parent at that moment. I wanted to write—to write what I was hearing. I felt a kind of birthing or conception—there was a sense of urgency to commit what I was hearing to paper. With no note pad on which to write I rifled through my purse when the paper napkins upon which I was penning my thoughts and observations ran out of space. The only thing I found were the deposit slips in the back of my checkbook. They would have to do and they did. When my meal was served I requested extra napkins from the waitress so I could continue to capture the story that will be discussed in this paper.

This paper was born out of a strange and chance encounter on the final night of my trip to Chicago, my first visit to that city, where I attended the second annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies, (AAACS), April 18- 21, 2003. The paper intends to open a window on what is happening in the field of education and curriculum not only within the walls of our schools but outside them as well. This paper explores the following issues: (1) the prevailing perspectives about

education and curriculum inside and outside the classroom, (2) Parental involvement or lack thereof in the education of their children and (3) Implications for continued curriculum and education reforms. These are critical issues as they are likely to determine the success of every country's education system.

My encounter took place in a public space. Was my space invaded or did I invade someone else's? I do not think any of us intruded or invaded the space. Regardless, I only intended to have dinner and a relaxing evening but was privy to a conversation from which I learned much about why it is imperative that educational reforms continue, and that teachers as well as parents be held accountable and are collaborators in the education of our students and future citizens. If we intend to "leave no child behind", as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 demands, then parents too have an important role to play in the education of their children. Our work as educators will not and cannot be accomplished without the support of parents. The conversation that ensued has provided grist for the curriculum mill, a dessert for my dinner that evening and a lingering note upon which I have played, replayed, visited and revisited again and again as a teacher and educator. The conversation has caused me to reflect on my own practice as an educator who prepare pre-service teachers. This happenstance has haunted me constantly, has kept me awake at nights and keeps challenging me to seek ways— new and different ways to teach and to provide a space for the voices of the students who I teach. It has caused me to become even a more reflective practitioner than I already am.

So with the night's memories fresh in my mind, my note-taking napkins and deposit slips on my knees, I began penning this story from several hundred feet in the sky, aboard American West Flight 5074, on my return journey to Ohio. I reflected on, ruminated and re-digested both the conference I attended, the discussions in which I participated, and the conversation in which I had the chance to indirectly participate. The reverie provided a great diversion for my fear of being trapped in such a small airplane and a confined space.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part presents the theoretical framework which is the lens used in focusing the discussion the paper. The second part discusses the setting and context, while the third part presents the argument and conclusions.

Literature Review

A call to collaborate with various stakeholders including parents in shaping education in general has a long history in many countries. According to Davies (1987) several proposals that advocate for an increased parent involvement in the education of their children are built upon the idea that the education of children should be viewed as a partnership between the school and the home. This partnership views students and parents as co-producers of education and not simply as passive recipients of educational services. Studies conducted on parental involvement, including helping with their children's' homework find that there are advantages and disadvantages to parents being involved in their children's work (Hoover-Dempsey, Battiato, Walker, Reed, DeLong and Jones, 2001). Parents can offer positive support and feedback; they can model and demonstrate, and are directly involved in their child's learning in the classroom. This can be a positive experience as parent and child work together to improve and reinforce skills and strategies taught by the teacher. Hoover-Dempsey et al., (2001) further addressed the question of why parents get involved in homework. Their research suggests three reasons: (a) parents believe they should be involved, (b) they

believe they make a difference in the learning of their children (c) they perceive invitations from their child or child's teacher suggesting that their homework involvement is wanted and expected. There are also negative effects of parental involvement in homework. There is no way to monitor whether the child or the parent completed the work. Sometimes the parent does not understand the reason or the benefit of the homework given and their attempts to help their child and can do more harm than good. It is therefore necessary that there is open communication between the school and the home so parents are aware of what is happening. Both parents and teachers can support each other in challenging activities and school events that might make children and or parents feel unwelcome or uncomfortable (Hofmann, 2005). A teacher sending a letter to the home to let the parent know what the class will be doing over a given period would be helpful to both home and school. The parent would have an idea of homework of what is expected of the child and be better able to collaborate with the school. While some parents are capable of assisting their child "many report that they feel unprepared to help their children with homework and that their efforts to help frequently cause stress" (Balli, 1998; Corno, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Burow, 1995; Perkins & Milgram, 1996). Parents who are unaware of the school's curriculum and standard for achievement might misunderstand and object to the homework assigned by the teacher.

Setting and Context

My strange encounter began at dinner. While I waited for my meal, I could not help hearing two women talking. Throughout this paper these women will be called Jane and Patricia (I do not know their real names) to protect their identity. Jane and Patricia's chatter was interrupting my thoughts. I could not block them out. They were seated about six feet away from my table in the section of the restaurant reserved for singles and couples. Did they have to speak that loudly to each other? Did they realize how loudly they were talking? What should I do? Should I go over and ask them to speak quietly? Should I have asked the waitress to relocate me? I pondered these thoughts for a while but did not act on any of them. We were not the only patrons seated in this area. I tried to focus on other things in order to distract myself from their conversation. Each time I tried to tune out those two women they seemed to raise their voices a crescendo. Were they speaking too loudly or was the restaurant too quiet? Other patrons were talking but the women's conversation was louder than everyone else. It was just no use trying not to block them out.

They kept on talking— talking louder and louder. When they began talking about schools, teachers and the curriculum I was reeled in. Trapped! Both women dissected and related their experiences with the respective educational systems from which they came. Jane about forty-five years of age, was apparently an American and Patricia, about sixty, a Canadian.

Perspectives About Education And Curriculum Inside And Outside The Schools

Jane and Patricia shared mostly about the experiences of their children within their educational systems. What really drew me [in] to the conversation was when Jane exclaimed:

“I was a mediocre student. All my life I have been mediocre, but it did not stop me from getting by in schools. The same thing happened when I went to university. Teachers don’t care. They don’t challenge students. Despite this I have arrived. I mean, I have my doctorate for God sake”.

What a damning statement! That statement spoke more to me more than anything else that was said that night. I wanted to know what she meant by her “teachers don’t care.” I wanted to questions what she meant by “teachers not challenging”. I wanted to clear up the ambiguities, or at least what I considered them to be, in her statement.

Patricia agreed that teachers did not care as she relayed the story of how her son had what is now identified as ADHD but no one in school took the time to see why he was not learning.

She continued,

“When I went and asked the teacher what was my son’s problem, why he was not reading at age ten she told me that it was my problem not my son’s. My son spent all his years in school and left not being able to read.” He can decipher words but he cannot read.”

Jane asked Patricia if she had ever had her son tested to which she replied that he is now twenty-five years old and was only tested when he left school at age eighteen. That was when she discovered that he had a learning disability and was also bipolar. Ironically, many people blame the United States of America educational system for over testing and diagnosing students with learning disabilities but here is one moment when I wondered whether or not such a student would have escaped the American school system. It is my belief that someone would have caught that he had a learning disability.

Would the student have graduated from school in the United States without being diagnosed that he had a learning disability? What is in place in other countries to ensure that the needs of every student are addressed?

Parental Role In The Education Of Their Children

No doubt many parents would also take away something from the conversation. Parental involvement means more than turning up at school to find out why a child is not learning. It involves helping the teacher to help the students and to help the child to understand and appreciate the teacher’s efforts in developing active learners. Parental involvement supports the communities of home and school. I gleaned much information for reorganizing my teaching strategies and for rethinking course assignment requirements for future pre-service teachers. Prior to the conversation between Jane and Patricia I just focused my teaching on preparing my students with pedagogical skills to teach their elementary students in interesting ways. I have since developed modules for my pre-service teachers and have begun to teach them ways in which they can involve and include parents in the day to day happenings in their classrooms.

Both women complained about how parents do not “intervene in the education of their children”. They [the women] however, said they tried to be involved in the education of their children. Jane complained that her partner does not want to ‘intervene’ in her child’s education and he does not take the time to help his own children. “He is good at mathematics but does not help” her biological “child who struggles with math problems”. She wished he were more involved in the life of her son. Patricia’s spouse did not play an active

role in the education of his child either. She had to work hard to provide economically for the family and her husband did not see his role as a parent who should be involved in their child's education.

The more the woman talked the more I came to realize that as teachers we need to teach more to our students, keep the lines of communication between home and school open, require more of students and forget the complaints about too much reading and homework. We need to raise the standards of our expectations of our students from kindergarten through university. The need for a more global and multicultural education also became evident. At one point during the conversation Patricia said something about her son being a fluent French speaker and Jane inquired how he learned French. Jane was given a lesson in the history and geography of Canada, as Patricia proceeded to tell her about the historical influence of France and Britain on the different Canadian provinces. The education we provide to our students must do border crossings. Everyday world gets smaller because of the internet and international travel and relationships. Teachers must not confine the education of students to what happens in the United States. We live in a global era and cannot continue to be insular in our education of our future citizens or they will truly be left behind. All teachers should be required to do refresher courses in global education issues every few years. What excuses do educators have when our graduates cannot name the countries that border the United States? I know teachers cannot teach all that our students need to know but they should teach students global awareness and solicit parental assistance.

Sometime during the conversation the Jane remarked about her son getting homework in Social Studies to "draw a poster of a run-away slave" and to take clothes to school to take part in a role play about slavery. Jane talked about how upset she was with the homework. She thought that homework such as that was offensive to African-Americans and said she imagined the pain one of these children would feel if someone white drew a picture of a slave in chains. Her son [who is not African-American] was instructed by her not to do the homework. She never mentioned if she told him or the teacher the reason for her stance nor did she address the action taken by the teacher when her son did not do the assignment. I was not privy to the response or reaction of both her son and the teacher who gave the assignment. If there is collaboration between parents and teachers in the education process then there is a transparency. Parents need to know what is happening in the school or in the classes of their children and can help teachers detect or discuss loopholes that might not have otherwise been seen. It is my belief that parents should not block an assignment without first knowing the purpose. Perhaps if she was told what was being taught in the classroom her reaction to the assignment would have been different. Was this Jane's way of becoming involved in the education of her child? She might have blocked some learning opportunities for her son. If young people are to be successful in today's world, they must understand that the essence of success in this complex society is about altruism. Society wants intelligent, thoughtful citizens who are socially aware and care about people and institutions. We need citizens who can empathize and possess the ability to work and get along with others. Did Jane rob her son of one of those experiences when she denied him the opportunity to role play with his classmates? How much does Jane know about diversity and multicultural education? How much does she know about the history of the United States? Does she know that schools now make accommodations for diversity and multicultural education and that school have included the history of underrepresented groups in the curriculum? Students need to be able to analyze issues and think

critically (Akanbi, 2007). According to Friere (2005) the Brazilian educator, students need to be able to take the initiative to act, empower themselves and transform their lives and their communities through the process of reflection and action.

Conclusion

It is evident from the conversation that there are deficiencies in the education system. Parents need to be educated to be active participants in the education of their children. I believe that the conversations would give curriculum developers and teachers a springboard from which to launch as they develop, restructure or rethink what they teach and how they teach what they teach and what they include in the curriculum. It became evident that there needs to be more global and multicultural education taught at every level of the educational system. This multicultural education should not be one of merely teaching tolerance but one that teaches about history, diversity, the other, cultures, individual development and identity, similarities and differences. It ought to be one that provides a deeper understanding of, and respect for, the other and promotes equity in the schooling of all students. Students must be taught to become personally responsible, justice oriented, participatory, civic competent citizens. Too often, social studies are taught in a vacuum, devoid of the lived experiences of students. Teachers must use authentic teaching tools drawn on the lived experiences of students.

I would like to add that the meal was delicious and compared favorably with the French cuisine of the “Big Easy”. *Laissez les bon temps rouler!*

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