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# Barriers and Supports to Curricular Innovation

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Barriers and Supports to Curricular Innovation

Thesis (M. A.)

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### **Curricular Decision-Making: Why Do We Teach What We Teach?**

As part of my preparation to become a teacher, I was given the rather routine task of designing a lesson and presenting that design and its implementation to faculty reviewers. Perhaps the most striking comment that I received in return was, “Why did you choose to teach the Pythagorean Theorem to these students?” The question was striking, specifically because I hadn’t really made that choice: it was the lesson that those students were scheduled to learn, at that time. It was the lesson that the textbook placed at that point in the course sequence. It was a presumably, supposedly important part of the Algebra course that those students were taking (not by choice, but as a requirement of their mandatory high school education). The question, “Why did you choose...” appealed to my curiosity, even as it frustrated me: it *wasn't* my choice. While I had decided that the Pythagorean Theorem would be the lesson I designed, I had never decided that this particular group of students ought to learn it. Who, then, did make the choice that this topic was relevant and appropriate? How did this come to be part of the curriculum I was to teach? How does any topic? And why?

A few years later, as part of an advanced certification process, I was similarly asked to consider not only *how* I teach but *what*. “Justify why these goals are important for these particular students” (NBPTS, 2007). The implication, that some educational goals may be more or less important for different particular students, remains challenging to the hegemonic vision of teaching practice, in which teachers implement the curriculum, as set forth by a textbook, a set of standards, a standardized test (Kohn, 2000). The very notion that teachers ought to have a role, let alone a central one, in choosing appropriate goals for particular students has been seen by

some as a part of a process through which curricula become less rigorous, leading to lower expectations on hard-to-reach students (Sykes, 1995). This creates an intrinsic tension: On the one hand it seems entirely relevant to ask teachers to make intelligent, deliberative decisions about what they teach, and to include their knowledge and understanding of their students' particular needs in those decisions (Danielson, 2007). On the other hand, teachers who do make those choices open themselves to accusations of "dumbing down the curriculum." How, if at all, do teachers navigate this tension, especially as they are continuously subjected to various efforts to increase "teacher accountability"? Are teachers even aware of the importance and desirability of adapting their curriculum and practice to suit their particular students?

Some teachers, at least, are: Not long ago, a colleague of mine expressed her frustration with this tension, saying "I just wish they'd let me teach what I know my students need." Shortly thereafter, the principal at the same school commented to me, "I wish our teachers would be more creative and adaptive, and give our students what they really need." By expressing the same essential frustration as the teacher, this principal implied that he was not the nameless "they" who is preventing the teacher from teaching to the needs of these particular students. Then who, or what, is? Where do these barriers to creative, adaptive curricular decisions initiate, and how do they express themselves to teachers, and to administrators? And how do administrators support their teachers in navigating this complex interplay of issues? What can administrators do to support teachers as they struggle to engage in creative, adaptive and deliberative curricular practice?

## Literature Review

### **Curricular Innovation: A Recent Historical Perspective.**

Although it may seem that the idea of a single national curriculum for the United States would be a quite recent innovation, with the adoption by 47 states of the Common Core State Standards, US school systems have for decades converged around a “de facto” national curriculum. This curriculum has been formed in part by “the redundancy of the standards” from state to state (Porter, Polikoff, & Smithson, 2009), and in part by the limited number of textbooks in use nationwide, coupled with the fact that most teachers work entirely within established curricula (Farrell, 2008). Put another way, “Most curricula in the middle and high schools assume the textbook is the syllabus” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 311) and most textbooks have been marketed to a national audience (Apple, 1993).

But the current relative uniformity of curriculum can be contrasted with the diversity of educational programs and wide range of pre-requisite expectations for admittance to higher education that marked the late 19th century, when wide-spread public schooling was in its infancy (Kliebard, 2007). Faced with what seemed to be an unmanageable range of educational programs across the country, the National Education Association convened its “Committee of Ten” in 1892, with the goal of standardizing college entrance requirements. Their resulting report (National Education Association, 1894) had the effect of prescribing primary and secondary school curricula and formalizing the traditional compartmentalization of school disciplines that persist today, despite persistent concerns about the appropriateness of that compartmentalized approach. Ralph W. Tyler (1949) notes that the members of the Committee

of Ten largely were engaged in documenting appropriate preparatory paths for their own academic careers (“Hence, the report in History, for example, seems to present objectives for the beginning courses for persons who are training to be historians” p. 26). More recently, Sir Ken Robinson (2005) has echoed this historical critique of narrowly compartmentalized curriculum, by problematizing the ways in which such a reductionist, divisive approach to education impedes creativity and limits the contexts in which students are prepared to apply their learning.

In the decades following the Committee of Ten Report, a variety of ideological forces sought, at various times and in various ways, to shape curricular theory and practice in the United States. Kliebard (2007) outlines four main ideologies that were most influential in the early 20th century: humanists (whom Kliebard describes as “guardians of an ancient tradition tied to the power of reason”, and including, according to Kliebard, led by Charles W. Eliot, who chaired the Committee of Ten), developmentalists (led by the likes of G. Stanley Hall, who attempted to apply Darwinian evolutionary theory to cognitive and social development), social efficiency educators (influenced by the ideas of scientific management led by the likes of Frederick Taylor), and social meliorists (led by Lester Frank Ward, founder of the American Sociological Association and a leading social liberalist), who saw education as an opportunity for increasing liberty and equality.

Another significant influence on the development of curriculum in the early 20th century, John Dewey (1916) argued that education and learning are a natural part of the human condition, that schooling ought to reflect and connect with the students’ rich reality, and that fragmentation of subject areas (while a useful organizing tool for the educator) can present some impediment to learning:

In fact, there are certain features of scholarship or mastered subject matter-- taken by itself-- which get in the way of effective teaching *unless* the instructor's habitual attitude is one of concern with its interplay in the pupil's own experience (p. 183).

Throughout the mid- and late-20th century, the ideological space that was shaped by Dewey and other progressives has been continuously re-explored, to one degree or another, and the plurality of ideas Kliebard describes in the early 20th century has collapsed into a dichotomy, as

“the child-centered school as opposed to the subject-centered school; the project or activity curriculum as opposed to traditional emphasis on subject matter categories; and in general the essential aspirations of Progressive Education as opposed to a tradition focused on what is to be known in a school curriculum” (Pilder, 1969, p. 593).

### **Curricula Reinforce Hegemony.**

As a leader in the early progressive education movement, Dewey frequently criticized the educational aims advocated by humanists and social efficiency educators, because they fail to focus on aiding the student in fulfilling his or her own personal aspirations (Dewey, 1916; Schubert, 1986). In some sense, more recent critical pedagogical theorists are following in this tradition, arguing that the current American school curriculum reinforces and recreates the existing social order, without considering the personal goals, desires, or needs of students. In particular, existing social and economic inequalities are maintained and widened through most school curricula:

“...the basic framework of most curriculum rationality is generally supportive and accepting of the existing economic, political, ideological and intellectual framework that apportions opportunity and power in American society” (Apple, 2004).

In this way, critical pedagogical theorists indict the dominant curriculum as a tool for maintaining social and class divides, finding for example that “Students from higher social class backgrounds may be exposed to legal, medical or managerial knowledge, for example, while



those of the working classes may be offered a more 'practical' curriculum (e.g., clerical knowledge, vocational training)” (Anyon, 2005. Pg 419). Some critics (Kozol, 1992. Kozol, 2005. Giroux, 2008) emphasize that curriculum has been used not only to maintain existing social divisions, but also to create social and class divisions, limiting the development of cultural capital in lower-class students and thus creating new barriers to franchise and social and economic success.

There is, however, little evidence that working teachers routinely recognize or publicly discuss this hegemonic reproduction of inequality through curricular practice, as described in the following quote by an urban school teacher:

“Society just wants things to keep going as they are. Teaching children to think, absolutely, positively ‘what-do-you-think, how-could-this-be-better-think,’ is a threat to the existing order... And so as a teacher, when I invite students to think, I am faced with more work than if I just ask them to fill themselves up with what someone else has thought... The problem, simply put, is that children left to their own education would probably be all right, but society isn’t really interested in well-rounded students. Society wants a workforce that does what it’s told, and does it on time” (Rehak, 1996, p. 281).

More often, teachers “rely on common sense rather than on thoughtful analysis” (Haberman, 1996) in approaching questions of curricula; Jackson (1992) argues that such a reliance on common sense is “one of the underlying assumptions of many people who belittle the importance of pedagogical training” (p. 10), thus reinforcing the idea that appeals to “common sense” are themselves a structure through which teachers are discouraged from engaging in thoughtful, deliberative, critical analysis of curriculum and what overt and hidden goals and implications it carries.

Another mechanism through which teachers are discouraged from serious consideration of curricular theory, design or even significant adaptation, is the movement for increased “accountability” for schools and teachers. The movement to tie measurable student outcomes to schools and even specific teachers began in earnest the 1980s (driven by the development of computerized student data systems) and has dramatically increased in the early 21st century. The current crisis mentality in educational policy has dramatically increased the pressure on schools, particularly with regards to student test data (Kohn, 2000), and states and local districts are currently in the process of creating or expanding “merit pay” systems (Goldhaber, DeArmand, Player, & Choi, 2008) based on student performance on standardized tests, despite the lack of any clear data tying such systems to any change (positive or negative) in student outcomes.

Finally, students and fellow teachers can, themselves, act as powerful mechanisms in reinforcing normative practices which in turn support socio-economic divisions. Critical pedagogue and long-time educator bell hooks begins her account of her struggle to innovate by describing students "...who did not want to be in a classroom that differed from the norm. To these students, transgressing boundaries was frightening" (hooks, 1994, Pg. 9). Martin Haberman (1996, Pg 122) echoes this perspective in describing the pervasive impact of the “pedagogy of poverty”-- which he asserts includes a substantial amount of “training” students to expect that schooling involves repetition and “work”, but not thought and learning:

Indeed, any teacher who believes that he or she can take on an urban teaching assignment and ignore the pedagogy of poverty will be quickly crushed by the students themselves. Examples abound of inexperienced teachers who seek to involve students in genuine learning activities and are met with apathy or bedlam, while older hands who announce, 'Take out your dictionaries and start to copy the words that begin with h,' are rewarded with compliance or silence.

### **The Teacher's Role in Curriculum.**

Relatively few teachers see themselves as curriculum developers, for reasons ranging from a self-perceived lack of authority (including the expectation that curricular development and adaptation is not part of the teacher's role), to insufficient training, to inadequate time in the work-day (Ben-Peretz, 1990). A recent report from the United Kingdom's Office For Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) found that

The principal barriers to innovation included anxiety from staff about a possible negative impact on national test and examination results; concerns about inspectors' attitudes to innovation; uncertainty about longer-term finance and resources; concerns about the reluctance or inability of staff to implement change; possible resistance to change among governors, parents and the local community (OFSTED, 2008, p. 5).

Whether or not teachers should engage in curricular development remains an unsettled question, with strong advocates on each side of the debate.

Teachers need to worry about how to implement what's there [in the curricular materials], not to go looking for it. Curriculum development is really, really hard, and teachers shouldn't be expected to have to go find materials or make them up" (Briars, 2011).

Even when framed in ways that appear supportive of teachers, as in the quote above, the suggestion that curricular decisions ought not be part of the teachers' role inevitably limit the teachers' freedom, and thus subvert the professional character of the teacher's work (Bushnell, 2003). This issue of autonomy as a part of teacher professionalism is also tied into measures of teacher and school accountability, with teachers increasingly describing their practice as being limited by a need to "teach to the test," narrowing their curricular practice to meet specific standards in an effort to enhance student test scores, if not student learning:

...the new accountability does more than separate academic performance from issues of equity, it also has devastating consequences for undermining the autonomy of teachers, lowering the quality of the curriculum and reproducing those tracking and stratification policies that bear down so heavily on minorities of class and race." (Giroux & Schmidt, 2004, p. 214)

The fact that research contradicts the notion that such limited teaching practice raises test scores (Allensworth, Correa, & Ponisciak, 2008) does not appear to have significant impact on the behaviors of principals and teachers, whether because those practitioners are unaware of the research, or because they discount it in the face of pressure from their own superiors.

On the other hand, at least some advocates have long suggested that teachers can and should engage in curricular decision-making as part of their routine teaching practice: Tyler (1949) sought to develop a rigorous, rationalistic system through which teachers might grapple with and construct personal, individualized answers to essential curricular questions. Ben-Peretz (1990) makes an impassioned plea for teachers to take ownership of curriculum through continuous deliberation and decision-making, while Meier (1995) and Danielson (2007) describe a more gentle process of fine-tuning curriculum in response to the specific students with whom a teacher is working. These voices, however, are sufficiently in the minority that Schubert (1986) sees fit (even while advocating for them) to classify them as an “*alternative* paradigm for curriculum theory and practice” (p. 287, emphasis mine).

It’s important, in considering how teachers grapple with curricular questions, and with their own conception of professionalism, to consider the role of school administrators (almost uniformly former teachers themselves) and their interactions with teachers. While principals doubtless have the best interests of the students and the school in mind, they necessarily have a more limited perspective on the lives and needs of particular individual students than teachers

do. Principals often play an important role in activities that serve to de-professionalize teachers in the name of “accountability,”

Many teachers never move beyond short-term planning: They plan for one week or one day at a time. As a result, their teaching often seems fragmented and disjointed. Many principals reinforce this emphasis on short-term planning by checking daily lesson plans, ignoring the need to help teachers develop units (Glatthorn, 2000, Pg 109).

while also being subjects, themselves, of accountability measures that impact entire schools:

Principals regularly used the language of 'students first' and 'doing what's good for students', but are principals and schools really acting consistently with that sentiment when their focus is so heavily on test scores? (Reitzug & West, 2009).

Not only do administrators influence curricular and instructional practice, but there is a distinct trend of administrators moving towards an ideology of social efficiency when they leave teaching and become administrators (Schiro, 1992), suggesting a potential disconnect between the goals and ideals held by teachers (which tend to be more responsive to the needs of individual students) and administrators (whose broader perspective, sometimes proudly described as “data-driven”, may more easily lose sight of those particular individual students). The means by which teachers and administrators communicate their goals and expectations (for students, for themselves, for each other) is of growing concern, but current publication on the topic is more often advice for implementation of strategies (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010; McEwan, 2003) than academic research.

## Methods

### Need and Rationale.

“Why do I have to learn this?” may be among the most frustrating questions asked of teachers by their students, but it also has the potential to be among the most relevant, in that it drives directly to the heart of the question of curriculum. Perhaps the most effective answer to this question comes from giving students greater autonomy and authority over their own learning. Teachers who implement such student-centered practices are not merely avoiding an annoying question: there has long been considerable evidence that students who participate in this sort of innovative/progressive curriculum and instruction are better prepared for further academic work. Perhaps the first major study to make this finding was the Progressive Education Association’s “Eight Year Study”, initiated in 1930 (Aikin, 1942), which compared students of traditional curricula to their peers in progressive schools, the latter of which experienced much greater curricular freedom and innovation on the part of teachers. The study found that students taught in progressive schools scored lower on college entrance exams, but performed better in college.

“Perhaps students from traditional schools learned more docility, compliance, and how to follow directions... those who experienced the most experimental curricula far excelled the traditional students” (Schubert, 1986).

More recently, Harvard physics professor Eric Mazur has replicated similar findings, when comparing traditional lecture with more progressive “Peer Instruction,” which is characterized by student-to-student discussion of course topics (Mazur, 1997).

At the same time, some authors in recent decades have made impassioned pleas for a shift “from teaching to learning” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010; Barr & Tagg, 2000), with a comparable goal of improving students’ educational outcomes. Nevertheless, teachers continue to experience increasing constraints on their curricular and instructional practice-- from “teacher-proof” scripted curricula to the public release of short-term student gains expressly intended to shame “underperforming teachers”. These “accountability measures” suggest a continued focus on teachers, and on teacher behaviors, rather than on students. Principals and other school administrators play an important role in establishing, enforcing (or refusing to enforce) and communicating to teachers the supervisory mechanisms by which teachers will be evaluated. That is to say, the degree to which teachers in a particular school ought to be prepared to answer to any particular “accountability measure” is established and communicated by the principal and other school administrators. In short, principals and school administrators are responsible for shaping the culture of a school environment, for communicating and modeling the mission, vision, values and goals of the particular school.

It is, at present, generally unclear what if any vision teachers have for their own role in curricular decision making-- indeed, it’s clear that no strong consensus exists as to what degree curricular decisions rightly belong to teachers, as has been explored above. Here, again, school administrators have a powerful role in establishing expectations of teachers, and any administrator who truly wishes to create an environment that is focused on student learning (rather than on teacher behaviors) must carefully create and maintain structural and systemic frameworks that both empower teachers with the autonomy to make decisions about curriculum and instruction, and also communicate to teachers how those decisions fit within and reinforce

the particular culture of the school. In order to better understand the ways in which educators and administrators engage in and support innovative, adaptive curricular practice, it will be necessary to understand the ways in which these individuals think about curriculum: the focus here is not on how often teachers engage in particular practices, but rather on how curricular decisions are made and implemented, based on what teachers believe, what they value, and how they see their role in curricular processes. This necessitates a qualitative approach, to understand the “symbolic interactions” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) between educational goals, student needs, societal expectations, and images of professional responsibility, from the perspectives of active educators. School administrators occupy an important role shaping these symbolic interactions, and establishing priorities and culture within a school, and so the present study will attempt to discover and compare the perspectives of teachers and administrators who work together.

### **Participants.**

There is significant evidence that teachers within urban schools are more often confronted with barriers to innovation, including both explicit structures that limit teacher autonomy and implicit pressures to meet particular expectations (Anyon, 2005; Haberman, 1996; Kozol, 1992). Participants in this study were drawn from a combination of urban and suburban schools in and around the city of Chicago, including both charter and private schools at the middle and high school grades, in order to examine a variety of perspectives and in the hope of finding evidence both of barriers to curricular innovation, and supports for it (that is, to find both “what’s stopping teachers” and “what works”). The Chicago Public Schools was undergoing a change in administration during the time period when this research was conducted, and its



research review board did not accept applications from independent researchers during this timeframe; as such, it was impossible to request or receive permission to include employees of the Chicago public schools for this study.

Participating teachers are subject-area specialists (rather than early childhood generalists), and include teachers of English, social studies, mathematics and media literacy, with a range of 4 to 12 years of teaching experience. Participating administrators included one principal, one head of school (similar to a principal or assistant principal), and one director of curriculum (as of this writing, a fourth interview with another principal is pending re-scheduling). Participants were found through a variety of means, including personal and professional contacts. Participants were not compensated for their participation. Each participant is identified here using a pseudonym, with teacher-administrator pairs sharing initials, as seen in Table 1 below:

<b>Teacher (Content area / Grade level)</b>	<b>Administrator (Role within the school)</b>
Amy (Social Studies/middle school)	Amanda (School Curriculum Director)
Beatrice (English/high school)	Brandon (School Principal)
Charlie (Math/high school)	<i>Not available</i>
David (Media Literacy/middle school)	Denise (Head of School)

Table 1: Linked list of participants (pseudonyms). Participants sharing a row and initial work within the same school

**Procedures.**

In order to delve into the perspectives of teachers and administrators, and to examine the meanings that these participants place upon curriculum and its barriers and supports, each participant was interviewed in a one-on-one setting. Interviews were conducted using a common set of prepared questions (see Appendix A), with additional follow-up questions to address specific ideas and meanings suggested by the participant, and to provide frameworks, where necessary, through which participants might better explain their own partially-formed conceptions and narratives. Some interviews were conducted within schools, while others took place in neutral, public locations (coffee houses and restaurants). In order to preserve anonymity in the interest of free expressions, participants were not made aware of each others' identity, though every participant was aware that at least one colleague from their workplace was also participating.

The prepared questions are categorized according to themes which might impede teacher creativity, as suggested by existing scholarship (Ben-Peretz, 1990); however, interview data was analyzed using an open-ended coding system, after the majority of the interviews were completed, to allow the development of the researcher's own perspective between collection and analysis (Bogden & Biklen, 1992). Specific responses generally could be described in terms identified by Bogden & Biklen as "Perspectives Held by Subjects," "Subjects' Ways of Thinking about People and Objects," "Activity Codes," and "Relationship and Social Structure Codes". Each participant's responses were analyzed both in comparison to their in-school colleague, and to the other participants of the same group (teachers or administrators). Working from the a priori barrier categories suggested in Appendix A, analysis proceeded to classify responses into those a

priori groupings, or into new themes as suggested by the responses themselves. An initial pool of twelve minor themes, supported by more than one respondent, emerged. These themes were then examined for linkages-- that is, for complementary or connected meanings-- and consolidated into six major thematic groupings.

## Analysis

### Introduction: Themes.

In considering the voices of these teachers and administrators, several important themes emerge. Each of these will be explored and analyzed, in light of both the prior scholarship cited above, and particularly based on the participants' own explanation of their perspectives.

<b>Dominant Themes Summary</b>
Course development is common practice
Routine curricular decisions are very common
Teacher-Teacher and Teacher-Administrator interactions seldom support innovation
External standards stifle innovation
Testing is benign at best
Parents and school context do not influence curricular decisions

Table 2: Summary of dominant themes described by participants

1. **Course Development:** Despite having experience developing complete courses, these teachers are more comfortable making decisions about teaching practice than about curricular content; teachers are wary of making decisions about what does or does not belong “in the curriculum,” particularly for “core” courses (math and English).
2. **Routine Curricular Practice.** All of these teachers and administrators expect some amount of routine curricular decision-making as part of their regular teaching practice. Teachers draw substantially from their own experiences in shaping curricular units and instructional practices.
3. **Interactions Among School Personnel.** Teachers seldom see colleagues as resources for curricular innovation, nor do administrators expect teachers to support each other in driving innovative curricular practice. Rather, fellow teachers are more likely to be seen as an impediment to creative and adaptive curricular practice.
4. **Standards.** Although some expressed appreciation for external standards, when asked about the “most important ideas” taught in their school, these teachers and administrators universally described skills, processes and ways of thinking, rather than particular curricular content.
5. **Testing and Accountability.** Even among teachers and administrators who feel their students are well-prepared for standardized tests, there is considerable ambivalence about the role of testing in shaping curricular practice. These teachers and administrators consider the next academic level (high school or college) as a more

relevant guide for desirable student outcomes than goals measured by standardized tests.

6. **School's Isolation from Community.** Teachers and administrators do not envision any role for parents, the community or broader society in the decision-making processes of the school, instead viewing the school solely as part of an academic world.

### **Course Development: Core and Elective**

The teachers interviewed here uniformly engaged in substantial curricular decision-making in two common ways: Each of them, regardless of their content area or experience level, has at some point designed the curriculum for an entire course, and each of them continues to engage in some amount of routine decision-making (often described as “tweaking” a course) through a generally unstructured cycle reflective teaching practice. We’ll consider first curricular decisions at the scale and in the context of the development of a course’s content.

Every teacher interviewed indicated that at some point in their professional history as a teacher, he or she developed the content for an entire course. For the most part, these teachers seemed to regard this as a sort of necessary evil, a process that they did not seek to undertake, but which was for unavoidable for one reason or another. Beatrice, currently an English teacher, described a previous experience teaching a variety of Spanish language courses:

“In some courses I had a textbook, and I certainly added to that textbook, but what was taught in Spanish 2 was pretty much settled. In the AP classes, the curriculum is really set. I also taught a Spanish elective, advanced conversation and culture, and in that class, they didn’t give me a curriculum whatsoever. It was designed to be an alternative to what was going on in AP Spanish... I had to decide what topics or genres the course will

encompass. I had to look at what are the real goals for this course, and in that course, it was getting students to want to continue using their Spanish.”

The subtle tone in Beatrice’s description of her curricular decision-making (from “I certainly added to the textbook”, to a tone that suggests more obligation, “I had to...”) suggests that she may have seen the work of developing an entire course as more of a burden, whereas the more routine work of “adding” to an established curriculum is viewed more positively. This is reinforced by her current principal, Brandon, who refers to the school’s recently-developed curriculum maps as a framework within which routine curricular decisions can be made, without substantially altering the course content. “It’s our intention that those curriculum maps will be stable, enduring. They were developed by our teachers, but we don’t expect teachers to need to redo that work all of the time.”

These teachers describe relying upon a relatively narrow set of resources that have guided them as them in deciding what content ought to be included in a particular course: “I just started with my textbook, went through and through about what they’d need,” (Charlie). “They had a previous teacher who left... and that curriculum was dropped in my lap.” (David). “My own life experiences, and what I know students know or need to do, and that’s be empathetic-- I would say, that’s the most important thing.” (Amy). Other than school-wide curricular frameworks, neither teachers nor administrators were able to define mechanisms or structures that might help teachers to make crucial decisions about what does or does not belong within the content of a given course, which sometimes leads to a rather confusing balance between teacher autonomy and the teacher’s own discomfort with that autonomy. As Charlie somewhat perplexingly puts it,

“I don’t have that much input over what gets taught. I mean, yes, I’ve made every decision as to what gets taught, but these are skills have been taught for probably hundreds of years in the pre-calculus curriculum, so in the grand scheme of things I’m just copying what’s come before me. But how I teach it is entirely up to me.”

Charlie’s appeal to an somewhat vague “pre-calculus curriculum” which he assumes to be “hundreds of years” old (when in fact, calculus itself has been taught at an undergraduate level for fewer than two centuries) suggests that he is more comfortable appealing to a vague, nebulous external authority (the more nebulous the better, perhaps), rather than taking ownership of the decisions he otherwise admits to having actually made in developing his pre-calculus course. His comments also exemplify a general trend, that the participating teachers are more likely to make decisions about teaching practice than about curricular content. This, too, may be reinforced by administration’s reliance on “stable, enduring” curriculum maps-- Denise describes how one of the teachers she supervises (not a direct participant in this study) has worked to adapt to a “challenging” group of students: “All the teachers try to adapt to the kids that they have, but in terms of the actual topics, less so. I’d say that the actual topics are set, but how they approach it with particular kids, teachers have more discretion.”

Teachers’ caution in making decisions about what does or does not belong in the curriculum is somewhat stronger in “core” courses than in “electives,” as evidenced by Beatrice’s comment that

“I felt pretty comfortable that in an enrichment course, my own goals and thinking would suffice for that course, but there’s nothing wrong for the core curriculum to be the result of research and discussion at a broader level.”

Part of this argument is hinged on the notion that success in core classes, in particular, functions as an important part of the “sorting machine” in which schooling participates (Friere, 1970).

Nobody asks, “Can you do the art?” What’s valued in modern American education is mathematics and writing (and, to a lesser degree, scientific thinking and literary analysis)-- as can be seen by the emphasis on the new Common Core State Standards (which, as of this writing, only exist for math and English) and the limited (core) subjects tested on the ACT and SAT tests.

### **Routine Curricular Practice.**

Of course, curricular decisions occur not only on the broad scale (such as the course content decisions described so far, but also within the context of how specific units and lessons are structured. David, a middle school media literacy teacher, represents one end of the spectrum of routine practice, describing a vigorous process of continuous curriculum revision:

“It’s my hope that you rarely teach a lesson the same way twice... I don’t think I’ve ever done a project the same, every year there’s some new feature or piece to it... Tailoring their [the students’] experience to their personality, and to what you see is valid and what you see failed in the past-- constant reflective practice is very important.”

This fits with the culture of his school, as described by Denise, the head-of-school who supervises him: “I have a lot of confidence in our staff... their ability to develop the kind of academic experiences, curricular experiences that are going to suit their students, and that are going to fit the rest of the ethos at this school.” Denise demonstrates how an administrator can shape and communicate the culture of the school and the expectations upon teachers, which are in turn reflected in David’s comments, particularly with regard to the emphasis on creating experiences “tailored” (in his words) to “suit” (in her words) a particular group of students.



By contrast, Charlie, a high school math teacher, indicates having extensive curricular autonomy, which he seems to appreciate:

It's a very close relationship with my principal... He doesn't come into my classroom, he doesn't tell me what to do. He trusts every teacher-- 'You're the expert in your curriculum, you're the expert in your classroom, I'm not going to tell you the methods you should be using, I'm not going to tell you how to teach it. It's your responsibility as a teacher to figure it out.' He wants someone who's driven, who's going to figure this out for themselves, and if you're not driven, you're not going to be successful at this school.

This autonomy, however, may come at a cost: Charlie's principal almost appears to have abandoned the crucial leadership role, and in the absence of any guidance, stagnation may occur:

Elsewhere in our interview, Charlie indicated that he had modified his curriculum "not at all" in the current year, saying "we have a textbook we like, and we teach the curriculum from there."

This tension between administrative pressure and stagnation is also reflected by Amy, who described her relationship with administration as being "both nurturing and challenging," commenting that "I feel like I'm always trying to earn my job... that forces me to be creative."

In the absence of any real guidance from administration, Charlie describes changing instructional methods not in response to students' needs nor as the result of administrative guidance, but as a result of his own desire to grow as a professional:

"Part of it comes from me just understanding the material better... I don't think I had a deep enough understanding of the curriculum to really teach it to my students. I took statistics in college, and I expected my AP Stats class to be the same, and it sort of wasn't. Every year, I feel like I'm getting a better understanding of the math, and it makes, not so much changes to my lesson plans, but it shapes how I view the whole concept in my head, so when I deliver it it's a completely different delivery."

Here, Charlie also introduces the idea, common among every participating teacher, that their own experiences substantially guide their curricular decisions. David described relying on "my time

as a middle-schooler and a high-schooler” in designing his course, and Beatrice describes relying upon “the same texts that I read as a student.” As Amy put it, “Everyone takes from their own life, you know; what has been meaningful in my own life, like a ‘top 40’ list of the most meaningful instruction I’ve received, and I try to give that back to my students.” In this regard, we see teachers, whether consciously or not, defaulting to creating educational experiences that are substantially a reconstruction of their own educations-- similar, perhaps, to Tyler’s critique of the Committee of Ten’s efforts to build curricular programs suited to their own academic profiles.

### **Interactions Among School Personnel.**

Neither teachers nor administrators participating in this study expressed any substantial, collegial process through which curricular decisions might become a shared experience, built upon or reinforced by members of the school community. Although two of the four schools included teachers in the development of some form of curriculum map, that development process was “driven by our re-accreditation process” (Denise) or an effort to create a “stable, enduring” curriculum (Brandon) to which individual teachers would later refer. Denise describes curriculum mapping in terms of obligations, rather than as a tool for meaningful collaboration by members of the school community:

It was something we wanted to get underway, because it was something that was called for in the previous accreditation... but it’s hindered [curriculum development] just in terms of time, because we only have so much faculty meeting time.

No only was there no evidence of positive teacher-teacher interactions, but two of the four participating teachers related narratives which suggest that fellow teachers (particularly

those that are more traditional than themselves) can be a source of tension when it comes to curricular practice. Beatrice expresses some frustration with what she perceives as limitations on her creativity that are placed on her by the expectations of her more traditional fellow teachers, which she sees reflected some degree by the climate and culture of the school:

We think of science class as being “for” discovery learning, but we can set up discovery learning in any subject. One thing I’ve found at my school is that there are rows in every room, in some cases the chairs are bolted to the floor. In most of my rooms, I try to have students in a space where they can discuss more, have collegial discussions, instead of just talking to the teacher, and the other teachers didn’t like that. Students respond to the environment: when I put them in rows, they take on a more deferential role.

Similarly, David describes frustrating experiences when he’s attempted to collaborate with fellow teachers, such as when he’s suggested topics for interdisciplinary projects: “There was definitely a visceral sort of, ‘my curriculum is being attacked’ response.” In both of these cases, teacher-teacher interactions actively impede innovative teachers from expressing the autonomy, in both curricular content and teaching methodology, forcing them into a more traditional teaching model than they might otherwise choose.

### **Standards.**

It might be expected that administrators, when asked about the “most important ideas” taught in their schools, would avoid choosing particular curricular content: to do so would suggest a sort of academic favoritism, and few administrators are so politically inept as to suggest that the work of one academic department is more important than another. It may be more surprising that content-area specialists, when asked to describe “the most important ideas that you teach,” invariably described processes, skills, ways of thinking, or characteristics of

students, rather than specific content. These content-area teachers did not emphasize their own curricular content, but instead expressed an interest in the holistic development of their students as learners, citizens, and as human beings. This was true, even for the two teachers who expressed strong appreciation of external curricular standards (Charlie appreciates that standards “give teachers directions in terms of what needs to be taught”, which Beatrice echoes in stating that standards are “helpful in giving teachers frameworks in terms of thinking what should be accomplished.”)

Of particular interest, there was considerable alignment between the “most important ideas” within a given school, as expressed by administrators and teachers. Amanda (an administrator) described a focus on “enduring understandings,” a set of interconnected ideas that are pervasive throughout the school’s curriculum (across both content areas and grade levels) including citizenship and compassion. Amy, a teacher in the same school, emphasizes teaching empathy, and describes this in terms of “understanding where other people are coming from,” using examples from economics to literary analysis. Beatrice describes how her teaching practice is designed around “developing character” and states “I teach intellectual approaches, but not specific ideas.” This is reflective of her principal Brandon’s emphasis on “dignity, virtue and a quest truth” coupled with “developing approaches to critical thinking”. Denise’s focus on “preserving older literacies and really thinking about new literacies,” with an emphasis on leveraging technology for instruction and an integration of humanities and discovery-driven science, is reflected in David’s statement,

You can’t possibly teach a kid everything that they need to know to function as an adult. The classical, well-rounded education doesn’t work anymore, because the world is just too complex. So what we have to do instead is to teach inquiry and discourse, dialog and

self-motivation... The point is, 'were you able to teach yourself, and could you teach this to another student?'

Taken together, these alignments suggest that administrators are effectively conveying the values of their schools to teachers, in ways that are reflected in the educational philosophies and curricular practices that those teachers engage in-- and that teachers consider these values to be more important than any particular curricular content defined by their subject's standards.

### **Testing and Accountability.**

The teachers and administrators participating in this study, because they work in private and charter schools, face a different set of accountability mechanisms than in traditional public schools. To a significant degree, they appear to hold themselves primarily accountable for preparing students for whatever educational institutions await those students after matriculation. "We have to prepare students to compete for spots, and then to succeed at all kinds of high schools," says Amanda of her private middle school. "We're much more accountable to our parents and our students and receiving high schools, than we are to any larger body." Even under this system, though, the school is not free of pressures: "There's a lot of pressure for [students to go on to] the big name high schools." These pressures are clearly felt by David, at the same school, even though "as an elective class, my grade doesn't contribute to the selective-enrollment process. Parents fear... that if they don't get into [top schools], it has a really heavy effect on kids and their families... I think that pressure, on our kids, is really counter-productive."

Beatrice shares similar concerns about her private high school students, when asked how standardized tests help her students. "In some cases it motivates them, but sometimes I think it

motivates them to the wrong thing. They focus on drilling, instead of looking at the bigger questions.” Despite his aforementioned appreciation of standards bodies, and his self-identification as a “fairly traditional” teacher, Charlie’s comments about his charter school’s tight and narrow focus on preparing students to achieve high scores on the ACT echoed the Progressive Education Association’s decades-old concerns about the distinction between admissions to post-secondary educational systems, and success therein:

I think it helps them get into college. I think it does them a dis-service, though, for when they get to college. I mean, ultimately, it takes away a lot of the critical thinking components of the class... With there being so much focus on the ACT, I don’t know if there’s as much focus on getting them to be successful in college as there is getting them into college. I know that a lot of what senior year is, it’s really getting them those critical thinking and ready skills to get them prepared, but I don’t know if one year is enough.

### **School’s Isolation from Community.**

Although the participating administrators universally agree that their schools are accountable to parental expectations, as indicated above, neither administrators nor teachers participating in this study saw parents as partners in making curricular decisions. Instead, teachers and administrators generally describe parental interactions, particularly those involving curricular decisions, in terms of the problematic concerns that parents raise:

They do, to the extent that we’re teaching 6th, 7th, and 8th graders, so it’s very touchy: Are these kids adults? Are they still children? What kind of material can they handle? But, in most cases, parents will trust you... I have a book on my shelf which mentions masturbation, and one of my parents saw it and said ‘I want that book removed.’... So, there’s just more of a concern for innocence or childhood, which I can understand.

This quote from Amy captures a common teacher-parent interaction, characterized by incomplete parental trust, and a significant clash between the culture and values of parents in contrast with

those held and promoted by the school. Beatrice describes similar experiences at her school, saying, “I’ve heard that there have been books that parents have complained about, either to the department chair or to the administration. Those books have been removed.”

Amanda, in describing the role of parental involvement, emphasizes her perspective that parents ought to have only a limited influence on the business of the school, contrasting parental opinion with the professional decisions of school personnel:

I wouldn’t call it ‘a role’ in what gets taught. At the beginning of every year, we have a meeting and parents come... I think that they do see that there are changes that evolve, but their opinion isn’t at the top of the list (laughs)... We have to base it on what we know is essential for education and for learning... And I think that they need to be valued, and there is a respect for their opinion, but then we have to say, ‘No, I’m the professional.’

This distinction between parents and professional school personnel is echoed by Brandon, who values parental involvement, so long as it is constrained into an expected and accepted role:

We’re fortunate to have parents who are really engaged in their children’s education, and in what their children are doing in school, but in terms of setting the focus or the objectives for a class? No, that doesn’t happen.

Charlie describes how the mission, vision, values and goals of his school are out of synch with the needs and desires that parents in his community have for their children:

Many of our kids are the first in their family to graduate high school, and most are the first to go to college, and getting the parents to buy into that-- particularly for the students that want to leave Chicagoland-- is a challenge... Our college counselor will routinely meet with parents during the senior year to get the parents to try to understand the importance of college, and they even try to do that during freshman and sophomore year as well, but in terms of curriculum, no [parents don’t have an influence].

Altogether, these school personnel see themselves not in terms of their relations to the families they serve, but rather as part of an academic system, more closely tied and more accountable to the next level of school (be it middle school to high school, or high school to college) than to the families and (by extension) communities in which they are situated. They represent a substantial disconnect between the academic focus of these schools and the academic interests of parents, between the culture of the school and the culture of the community.

### **Conclusion**

Captured above are some of the things that this particular set of teachers and administrators have to say about what they see as valuable in their schools' educational experiences, how they make decisions regarding those curricular experiences, what they see as challenges to those decisions, and how they see (or fail to see) themselves as active and vital participants in innovative curricular development. But what are the forces that shape those viewpoints? What influences (hidden or clearly-stated) are imposed by the broader social and cultural contexts within which schools reside? In short, how are these participants acting out or resisting against the reinforcement of hegemony?

### **The Paradox of Curricular Work**

Beginning again with the initial theme of the development of complete courses. It is striking on the face of it that each teacher whose voice contributed to this work has been called upon, at some point within their first six to eight years of teaching, to develop an entire course from scratch. In every case, teachers described this process not as a goal that they had



established or sought out, but as a necessity which they faced when called upon to teach a course for which no clear curriculum existed within the school. There is some evidence to suggest that these teachers are characteristic of the field generally: one group of centralized curriculum design advocate laments that “educators often disparage text- books, and many reform-oriented teachers repudiate them, announcing disdainfully that they do not use texts” (Ball & Cohen, 1996). Assuming that we can extrapolate from these four teachers, then the anecdotal suggestion is obvious: Curricular development at the level of a year-long course is, at least sometimes, part of the job of teaching.

Yet even as they acknowledge that teachers *do* engage in large-scale curricular development work, teachers are reluctant to identify themselves as curriculum developers, as though curriculum development is a thing that teachers sometimes *have* to do, but isn’t really part of how teachers identify or describe their own work. What generates and maintains this paradox? To some degree, it likely stems from external images of teachers, who are frequently framed as low-skilled laborers, rather than as intellectual and creative professionals (National Academy of Education Committee on Teacher Education, 2005). Within this de-professionalized view of teachers, which correlates with the modular design of schools derived from the factory-design system (Robinson, 2005), course development ought to be the work of specialized professionals -- true intellectual workers -- rather than mere instructional delivery specialists (i.e., teachers). The four teachers participating here, through their discomfort with their own work as curricular developers, lose the opportunity to take well-deserved credit for the work they have done, and thus perpetuate the under-valuing of themselves as teachers.

To another degree, this paradox may derive from the teacher's lack of any specific guidance or training in curricular design-- or more importantly, their *perceived* lack of preparation for the wide range of work that comprise the teaching profession. Even within the sphere of education, novice teachers are given consistent signals which emphasize that they, as novice teachers, should expect to be woefully unprepared for the volume and intensity of their work (Jackson, 1992). Sources that ostensibly seek to help teachers (especially novice teachers) frequently establish the necessity for the advice and aid they offer by establishing, in comforting tones, the expectation that teachers are generally under-prepared and out of their depths. As one example, a recent book published by the National Academy of Education's Committee on Teacher Education, co-edited by the great teacher-advocate Linda Darling-Hammond, begins by asking, "How is it that we permit so many ill-prepared individuals to assume such an important role in society?" (National Academy of Education Committee on Teacher Education, 2005). By framing their own offer of assistance in these terms, advocates for teachers also reinforce the hegemonic image of teachers as inept and poorly-qualified, rather than as competent professionals facing an admittedly challenging (but not insurmountable) set of goals.

### **Reconstructing Ourselves as a Reinforcement of Hegemony**

Teachers across the board reported relying upon their own experiences as students, in making curricular decisions. To some degree, this may reflect the reality that teachers are uncomfortable with their own training and background in curricular discourse (Ben-Peretz, 1990). Ball and Cohen (1996) similarly attribute teachers' reliance on their own experiences and personal, isolated judgement in shaping their curricular practice to their assertion that "our

system [of education] lacks strong curricular guidance,” though this observation is problematic in its own right, as stronger curricular guidance would seem to necessarily indicate an increase in the formal restrictive barriers to intellectual freedom and curricular innovation already experienced by teachers. “Curricular guidance” is a narrow path to navigate: too much guidance creates limitation and constraint on teacher freedom and thus teacher innovation, but too little guidance leaves teachers with only vague ideas about how to appropriately utilize their intellectual freedom, and teachers are thus uncomfortable in making bold decisions about curriculum.

Faced with such a void of guidance, teachers tend to make decisions that they perceive as being low in risk (personal, academic, or professional). One thing that each of these participating teachers clearly was sure of is that their own educational experience was basically sound, basically acceptable and accepted-- by themselves, their communities, and their own teachers. Lacking any other guidance, their own personal experiences serve as the only reliable model to safely emulate. But this sort of risk-averse decision-making, this “failure of nerve” in teaching and curriculum development (Apple, 2004) is one mechanism by which hegemony reinforces itself. Like reliance on “common sense” in curricular design and implementation, reliance upon the teacher’s own personal experiences tends to disengage the teacher from critical reflection upon and analysis of the goals (both overt and hidden) of the educational experience. The emphasis on the teacher’s past experience (and not on the students’ experiences, which are often very different) produces a substantial impediment to adaptive, innovative curricular processes that would truly focus on and serve the *particular* students in a given class.

### **Supports for What's Most Important**

All seven participants expressed that “the most important things” taught in their schools and classes were not any content-related skills or knowledges, instead referring in one way or another to a set of social skills associated with being a high-functioning, well-rounded, or morally sophisticated citizen. This set of values is reminiscent of John Dewey’s “aims in education” (Dewey, 1916), in that they reflect the participants’ desire to use education as a process by which students are both individually liberated, and are prepared to participate meaningfully and productively in a democratic society. Yet despite this emphasis (at the personal level among school personnel) on character and the holistic development of the student-as-citizen, the infrastructures of these schools, and of the vast majority of schools within the United States, are built exclusively around narrowly-defined, isolated curricular content (Kliebard, 1986).

It may be that, were we to probe more deeply, we would find that educators and policy makers might find it difficult to reconcile a single set of standards of character, citizenship or morality around which to find broad agreement. This is not particularly unsettling, as the diversity of opinions regarding such social questions is arguably a hallmark of a democratic society (Schubert, 1986). It’s also clear that even in the absence of a universally agreed-upon set of outcomes or aims of education, schools and school systems are capable of creating infrastructures to support curricular goals (Tyler, 1949; Kliebard, 1986). The lack of systemic structures to support the sort of holistic growth valued by teachers and administrators may, instead, be tied to the challenges associated with creating measurable (preferably quantified, statistically-tractable measures) of student outcomes.

The current culture of school reform is driven primarily by an obsession with what can be measured (Kohn, 2000), with a growing emphasis on measuring “teacher quality” as an index of the effect that a given teacher has upon the aggregate student population that that teacher works with. These measurable outcomes are, themselves, tied to specific pieces of content (which are, themselves, increasingly narrow: art and physical education have never been considered as relevant in these measures, and the current emphasis, guided by the Common Core State Standards, has shifted the emphasis even further onto mathematics and literacy as the supposedly most important content). This is, by no means, what teachers or administrators believe are valuable in the educational process. At best, these participants tolerate testing as a necessary evil, describing their support of testing in terms of its role “as something these kids will need to know how to do well on” in their future careers as students (if not as adult members of society).

Yet even in these schools, where testing is seldom seen as central to the aims of the educational program, there are few real structures in place that support (let alone measure) the socialization and social skills that the schools truly value. Instead, the hegemonic principles that emphasize narrow curricular goals and content knowledge continue to drive the structure of these schools.

### **Isolation Reinforces Status Quo**

Teachers and (especially) administrators within this study were exceptionally clear that they see no significant role for parents in the curricular decision-making process of their schools. While this may be interpreted as a strong support for teacher professionalism (and, indeed, at least one administrator justified her exclusion of parents from curricular processes in exactly

those terms, “we’re the professionals”), it also serves to isolate the school from the communities and families that the school serves. This isolation, in turn, allows school personnel to disengage from thinking critically about the role that their school plays within their community, the lives of the families they serve, and the broader society. This is typical of schools in general, which tend to value parental involvement with the school, but only on their own terms: specifically, teachers and principals generally want parents to be a resource for the school to use (as volunteers who perform specific, narrow tasks defined by the school), but not as partners in guiding the school’s focus or making critical decisions about school practice (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

But isolation from meaningful parental and community feedback and input allows the school to move into a sort of “echo chamber,” where the diversity of opinions that influence decisions is less diverse and teachers and administrators are likely to experience fewer critical questions about existing practice: Parents are, in general, far more likely to question the value of particular curricular elements than are students (even if such questioning may, in its way, threaten to undermine the image of teachers as professionals). Lacking these critical questions that come from outside of the paradigm of professional educators, administrators and teachers may be more likely to constrain themselves to curricular practices that maintain the educational status quo (i.e., hegemony). That said, parents sometimes do call for the reinforcement of hegemony, themselves, particularly in the case of middle- and lower-class parents (Giroux & Schmidt, 2009)

In the present system, teachers are accountable only for engaging in the limited set of behaviors commonly regarded as acts of teaching in urban schools -- that is, the pedagogy of poverty. Students can be held accountable only for complying with precisely what they have specifically and carefully been directed to do. Administrators can be held accountable only for maintaining safe buildings; parents, only for knowing where their

children are. Each constituency defines its own responsibilities as narrowly as possible to guarantee itself "success" and leave to others the broad and difficult responsibility for integrating students total educations (Haberman, 1996).

What's critically needed is for administrators and teachers to begin valuing parents and other community members as partners within the school, adding to the diversity of opinions and acting as strong advocates for the need to adapt curricular practice to the particular needs of their children, the school's students.

### **Suggestions for Practice, Implementation and Policy**

One observation to take away from this study is that teacher autonomy is not sufficient to drive innovative curricular practice: The most innovative teachers here are those who are guided-- driven, even-- by their administrators towards a consistent process of curricular development. Even in these most successful environments, though, there's little real structure to support or provide feedback to teachers regarding their curricular practice. Instead, teachers understand that innovation is simply part of the environment and culture of the school-- in at least one case, that understanding is based on the observation that teachers who have failed to innovate are no longer welcome as employees at that school.

Like any element of school culture (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010), developing and maintaining a culture of innovation is undoubtedly a challenge: it's certainly possible to imagine structures intended to raise teacher quality, based on a lifeless rubric intended to measure how innovative a teacher is in his or her curricular decision-making. Such rigid structures would likely be counter-productive, not because innovation is unmeasurable, but because the spirit of innovation thrives when it is allowed to be a creative process. But surely, it

must be possible for school administrators, in collaboration with teachers-- not to mention parents and other stakeholders-- to establish a culture of innovation that is not based solely upon a high-pressure, “innovate or die” approach (as Amy described her school’s climate, “It makes some people nervous, but I’d rather be challenged.”) The challenge, in any case, clearly does not rest solely with teachers, nor solely with administrators: as exemplified by Denise and David (the most successfully innovative participants in this study), supporting innovative teachers requires both the leadership of administrators, who demonstrably and consistently value innovation and reflective/responsive teaching practice, and the commitment of teachers who are willing to not only engage in the intellectual work of developing and redeveloping curriculum, but also to take ownership over and responsibility for those decisions.

While this study is primarily interested in understanding curricular processes at the level of the individual teacher, administrator, or (at largest) school, there are policy implications related to the calls for changes to school structures and the re-acculturation of schools, and actions that can and should be undertaken by policy-makers to support schools that are attempting to increase the implementation of adaptive curricula that serve the goal of holistic development of students. Primarily, educational policy must begin to clearly and explicitly recognize and value the role that teachers play in designing curriculum, so as to put an end to the ambiguity and ambivalence that teachers feel about their work in that domain. Secondly, policy-makers can make room for more innovative approaches to holistic educational practice by reducing the emphasis on narrowly-defined curricular content in education (which is reflected in policy regarding curricular standards, in course requirements for high school graduation, as well as in licensure of teachers by often very narrowly-defined content areas). Finally, policy-makers



can provide guidance and structures that identify and place value upon the kinds of broad skills (which transcend specific content knowledge) that teachers and administrators identify as “most important”. An encouraging example is the current policy debate regarding an emphasis on critical thinking skills in American schools (Halpern, 2003; Robinson, 2005).

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

### Interview Questions for Teachers

#### 1. Background information

- a. Tell me about the class(es) that you teach.
- b. How long have you taught, and what subjects/grade levels?
- c. What degrees do you hold?
- d. Would you consider yourself a veteran teacher, a novice, or somewhere in between? / How comfortable are you with your level of experience as a teacher?

#### 2. Preconceptions about appropriate degree of curricular freedom

- a. What do you think are the most important ideas that you teach?
- b. What authorities, outside of your own classroom, do you rely upon to help you decide what should be taught in your class?
- c. How would you characterize a “traditional” teacher in your field?
- d. How would you characterize a “progressive” teacher in your field?
- e. Where would you place yourself on a spectrum of traditional-to-progressive teaching?
- f. To what degree do you think that it is part of a teacher’s job to engage in curricular decision-making?

#### 3. History of curricular innovation

- a. In the past three years of teaching, to what degree have you constructed your own curriculum?
  - i. This can be as simple as modifying a worksheet or a problem set, or as sophisticated as a completely redesigned scope and sequence.
  - ii. Whether individually or as part of a group, are there any instructional units that you have designed from scratch or substantially modified? Please describe that process.
- b. During *this* school year, to what degree have you constructed your own curriculum?
  - i. To what degree are you implementing ideas that you’ve designed or helped to design previously?
  - ii. Are there any units or lessons that you’ve completely redesigned for this year?

iii. {If so} What drove your decision to redesign that particular unit or lesson?

4. Signaling clarity and consistency

- a. How would you characterize your relationship with your administration?
- b. To what degree do you think your administration encourages you to engage in curricular decision-making?
- c. How do you think your administration views your role in curricular decision-making?

5. Resistance from students, parents and peers

- a. How much do you adapt what you teach, based on the students you have?
- b. Do parents ever have a role in deciding what gets taught in your class? (If so, How? If not: What do you think keeps that from happening?)
- c. How do your interactions with other teachers and staff here shape what gets taught in your class?

6. External assessments / standards / alignment

- a. Do you think that your students are well-prepared for standardized testing?
- b. What do you think might prepare them better?
- c. To what degree do you think that standardized testing helps your students?
- d. To what degree do you think that standards (ILS, CCSR) help you, or your students?
- e. What larger issues, policies or expectations within the broader society help or hinder you in making decisions about your curricular development or implementation?

7. Open-ended

- a. What do you think has made it possible {would make it possible} for you to participate in designing and adapting the curriculum you teach?
- b. What do you think makes it hard for you to create or implement your own ideas about what to teach and how to teach it?

8. Conclusion

- a. That's all the questions I have for you. Are there any comments that you wanted to add?
- b. Do you have any questions for me?
- c. Thank you for your participation.

### **Interview Questions for Administrators**

#### 1. Background information

- a. Tell me about your school's academic program.
- b. How comfortable are you with the level of experience of the teachers in your school?

#### 2. Preconceptions about appropriate degree of curricular freedom

- a. What do you think are the most important ideas that are taught in this school?
- b. What authorities do you and your teachers rely upon to help you decide what should be taught here?
- c. Where would you place your teaching staff on the spectrum of traditional-to-progressive teaching?
- d. To what degree do you think that it is part of a teacher's job to engage in curricular decision-making?

#### 3. History of curricular innovation

- a. How much flexibility and freedom do you give teachers to design the syllabus, content, or specific instructional units for the courses they teach?
- b. Are there any specific expectations that your school places on teachers, in terms of planning, adoption, re-design or implementation of curriculum?

#### 4. Signaling clarity and consistency

- a. How would you characterize your leadership style?
- b. To what degree do you encourage your teachers to engage in curricular decision-making?
- c. How do you think your teachers view their role in curricular decision-making?

#### 5. Resistance from students, parents and peers

- a. How much would you say that teachers in this school adapt what they teach, based on the students they have in class?
- b. Do parents ever have a role in deciding what gets taught in any of the classes in this school? (If so, How? If not: What do you think keeps that from happening?)

## 6. External assessments / standards / alignment

- a. Do you think that your students are well-prepared for standardized testing?
- b. What do you think might prepare them better?
- c. To what degree do you think that standardized testing helps your students?
- d. To what degree do you think that standards (ILS, CCSR) help your teachers? Your students?
- e. What larger issues, policies or expectations within the broader society help or hinder you in making decisions about your curricular development or implementation?

## 7. Open-ended

- a. What do you think teachers here find the most challenging?
- b. What are the greatest challenges to instructional planning and delivery that your teachers face?

## 8. Conclusion

- a. That's all the questions I have for you. Are there any comments that you wanted to add?
- b. Do you have any questions for me?
- c. Thank you for your participation.