Understanding Curriculum as a Polyphonic Text

Curriculum Theorizing in the midst of Standardization

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THE STANDARDS MOVEMENT is the basic theme of education in the 21st century with a goal of high standards for all and a focus on outcomes accompanied by accountability. Standards-based or outcome-based curriculum can certainly have a positive effect on school programs, as such standards define and direct instruction, making it easier for the teacher to know what to teach and making it easier to measure student achievements (Wiles & Bondi, 2011). However, Dewey (1938/1997) criticized long ago how the traditional subject-matter of education developed standards and rules of conducts emphasizing conformity with the rules and standards, promoting "docility, receptivity, and obedience" (p. 18) among students while teachers became the agents who transmitted knowledge and skills and enforce rules of conduct. This traditional scheme, according to Dewey, is one of imposition from above and from outside, creating "the gulf" (p. 19) between the school and the learner.

Perhaps "the gulf" may not have been wide enough for policy makers. Since the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, which serves as a point of origin for the standards-based reform in the United States (Hakuta, 2011), movements for higher standards and accountability paved the way to leading most states to implement content standards throughout the mid-1990s. These movements culminated in the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (2002), and now in the more recent Common Core State Standards (Bausmith & Barry, 2011), which are designed to ensure that all students are college ready (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010).

Current research increasingly indicates how the standards-based reform with policies of standardization has many negative consequences on the curriculum and teachers' professionalism in particular. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2006), the standards-based reform legislated in NCLB changes the images of knowledge, teaching, and teachers in such a

way that teachers' local and professional knowledge is regarded as mere anecdote, not as a legitimate way of producing knowledge and theory about teaching and learning. In this context, teachers are expected to teach to state standards and standardized tests, thereby reducing their practice to the work of technicians teaching a narrow set of skills with little room for professional judgments. The challenge for teachers, here, is to prepare their students to pass state-mandated tests and, at the same time, to figure out ways to engage students in relevant, authentic, and meaningful learning experiences.

However, as Lytle (2006) notes, educators do welcome high standards, but then the problem lies in the overemphasis on standardization, the term that has now become synonymous with standards (Sleeter & Stillman, 2009). Raising standards has grown to mean standardizing curriculum. McNeil (2009) also warns about the confusion between the two terms, standards and standardization, and challenges the widespread notion that standardization leads to meeting high standards. She analyzes a Texas case to show how "issues of quality and high standards become so easily co-opted by the similar language—but oppositional philosophy and opposite consequences—of standardization" (p. 386). Further, she argues how the long-term effects of standardization are damaging, creating inequities and widening the gap between the quality of education for poor and minority youth and that of more privileged students. The language of standardization appears to denote equity, assuring that all children receive the same education, but behind the usages of these terms in educational policy, is a political agenda that serves the interests of the privileged (McNeil, 2009). Lipman (2009), who researched four schools in Chicago, also points out how mandated curricula, imposed standards, and teaching to standardized tests deprive teachers of opportunities for professional and ethical judgment, further eroding teachers' agency. Standardization prevents teachers from being decision makers who can take advantage of new opportunities to learn and adapt situations to make them more compatible with their own teaching situations. As a result, teachers increasingly feel that they are becoming deskilled laborers or technicians (Apple, 2009), suffering from the loss of their autonomy and agency (Kemmis & Smith, 2008; Macintyre, Latta, & Kim, 2008).

In this era of standardization, where the proliferation of school, district, and nation wide policies currently dominates educational discourses (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999), policy makers insist on the desirability of a standardized curriculum with uniform outcomes (Flinders & Thornton, 2009). The aim of the formulation of standards and the measurement of performance is to systematize and standardize education so that the public will know which schools are performing well and which are not (Eisner, 2009). However, less attention seems to have been paid to questioning the premises of standardization with questions such as why uniform outcomes are desirable in the first place (Flinders & Thornton, 2009).

In this paper, we (a teacher educator and a high school math teacher) engage in curriculum theorizing to understand how a school wide curriculum project, which one of the authors planned and enacted in her high school, is experienced by different stakeholders and to understand what the overall experience might mean for the field of curriculum studies in the current milieu of standardization. According to Pinar (2007), curriculum theorizing is an effort to link lived experience to scholarship and an intellectual activity that involves an understanding of what we experience in the teaching practice. More specifically, curriculum theorizing is a valuable activity to diminish the either-or dichotomy between theory and practice and understand the question of what to do in the classroom without an inclination to compromise with the complexity of theory (Dewey, 1938/1997). In a curriculum theorizing effort, we question the premise of the uniform outcomes that are expected in the context of standardization with the

Bakhtinian notion of *polyphony*, which refers to "a plurality of independent, unmerged voices and consciousness" (Bakhtin, 1963/1984, p. 6). We explore possibilities of understanding the curriculum as a polyphonic text to challenge the domination of the meta-narrative of standardization that works as an official force. We argue that curriculum as a polyphonic text requires that different voices be heard without having one voice privileged over the others, producing no final, complete truth, thus promoting a genuine dialogue among stakeholders to improve curriculum.

Research Background

Kim (teacher educator, pseudonym) and Debbie (practicing teacher, pseudonym) met in Kim's doctoral seminar, Curriculum Theory, in which eight students were enrolled. Six of them were practicing teachers in K-12, and the other two were former teachers. The goals of this seminar course were to engage in personal curriculum theorizing to understand the nature of curriculum in relation to curriculum theory; to examine challenges and possibilities of putting curriculum theory into practice; and to explore the current field of curriculum that has been reconceptualized as the scholarly and disciplined understanding of educational experience, specifically in its political, cultural, gendered, and historical dimensions. Hence, Kim wanted teachers in her graduate class to engage in curriculum theorizing, linking their lived experience to scholarship, while exploring the personal and the political as reciprocal, evolving, and constantly emerging entities that impact their own meaning making of curriculum, pedagogy, and research.

As a high school math teacher, Debbie wanted to put her own understanding of theory into practice for the benefit of her students. Based on her inquiry into curriculum theory and practice, she wanted to plan and enact a curriculum that challenges the unitary notion of teaching and learning where students' knowledge is measured in the standardized test without considering their divergent learning styles and experiences. Through readings and dialogic conversations that she had in the curriculum class, Debbie believed that as a teacher, she was entitled to plan and enact a curriculum even though it may not necessarily be a part of the official curriculum that was handed to her and her colleagues in her school. Debbie says:

> *So this fall of 2007, I was full of anticipation, both for my work in the classroom and for my new college courses as well. I felt that my work in the university classes tied into my classroom practices and was looking forward to continued progress, both for my students and myself! Imagine my dismay while in this curriculum theory course as we read articles by William Schubert (1992) and Janet Miller (1992). These articles were about the enduring debate about whether or not teachers can be both practitioners and researchers. In the class discussion that followed the readings, the others in the class and I lamented on the fact that practicing teachers are not considered researchers. In those few moments of discussion all of the variables came together. Project based teaching was valuable and I could prove it! I decided that I had been doing research, myself. It might have started out as trial and error, but I had been finding out what practices were best for my students. I did not know the pedagogy in those early days, and this I do regret, but the fact remains that I had been figuring out what was and was not working for my students and trying to find ways to make it REAL. The realization that teachers are*

considered by many to be just 'mechanics' galvanized me into making a big leap. I decided then and there to put my teaching theory into practice. And it would be no small matter either. I was going for broke. (Debbie's reflective journal, October 12, 2007)

Debbie's narrative indicates her determination to work as a teacher-researcher who links theory to practice. This determination is what motivated her to initiate and plan a school-wide curriculum, Water Quality Symposium.

Mode of Inquiry

We draw upon narrative inquiry that has become an influential research methodology within teacher education (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007; Goodson, 1995). The narrative methodology challenges and problematizes the nature of knowledge as objective and questions as unitary ways of knowing (Polkinghorne, 1995). In using narrative, educational researchers intend to interrogate the nature of the dominant view of education and try to reshape our understandings of education and schooling through the lived experiences of teachers or students (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Munro, 1998; Phillion, He, & Connelly, 2005). Narrative inquiry is cross-disciplinary and its applications now extend beyond a research methodology; utilized as a pedagogical tool in teaching and learning (Coulter, Michael, & Poynor, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Riessman & Speedy, 2007). More recently, the use of narrative as curricular and pedagogical strategies has been explored in the field of teacher education (Conle, 2003; Coulter, et al., 2007). There are also studies that describe how significant narrative inquiry is in helping pre-service and in-service teachers make connections between the students' lives and the classroom and in understanding the interrelationships between narrative, pedagogy and multiculturalism (see Clark & Medina, 2000; Phillion, et al., 2005). Narratives capture meaning and interpretation of our lived experiences while providing a text to be examined and explored. They involve our intentional reflexive process in interrogating our own teaching and learning (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002).

Polkinghorne (1995) posits that there are two primary kinds of analysis in narrative inquiry: *analysis of narratives* and *narrative analysis*. In *analysis of narratives*, researchers collect stories as data and analyze them with paradigmatic processes in which categories are classified by emerging themes. In *narrative analysis*, on the other hand, researchers synthesize the data elements into a coherent story rather than separating them into different categories. Barone (2007) calls it *narrative construction,* in which collected data are reconstructed into a storied form. Coulter and Smith (2009) call this process *reworking*, *rendering*, or *crafting* (p. 587) in the "construction zone" (p. 577). That is, in the process of *narrative analysis*, the researcher reconstructs a story or stories, making a range of disconnected research data elements coherent (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008; Polkinghorne, 1995). Stories that are reconstructed through *narrative analysis* can appeal to the reader's understanding and imagination (see, for example, Kim, 2006). The power of *narrative analysis* is its epiphanic power, which can serve the educational community, capable of illuminating other settings (Dunne, 2005). In fact, curriculum can be understood as storytelling, which "provides us with many critical and creative conceptual tools for both understanding and improving the practice of curriculum leadership" (Gough, quoted in Pinar, 2007, p. 135). In this study, we reconstructed five different voices (stories) using

narrative analysis to understand how a teacher-initiated school wide curriculum was experienced by various stakeholders.

Methods

Research Site

Debbie's school, Green Valley High School (pseudonym), is a small school in the Midwest. It is located in a rural area, and the local economy is tied to its agricultural base. The school has served many generations of local families. This continuity has fostered a sense of shared identity that connects the school to the community. Students and their families are active in school sports and organizations and take pride in the intimate atmosphere. The teachers have a strong bond with the community through their commitment not only in the classroom but also in coordinating activities and coaching. The gold standard of this rural school community is the strength of its vocational and agricultural education departments. Over 75 percent of the student body is enrolled in classes or participates in extra curricular activities involving these programs.

Demographically speaking, in 2007-2008, the school had only 69 students in grades nine through twelve. Of those students, 97 percent are Caucasian and the remaining three percent are Native American. 42 percent of the students qualified for free or reduced school lunch.

Data Sources

The research methods employed in this study were participant observation, observation with field notes, semi-structured interviews, analysis of primary documents such as curriculum materials, and Debbie's reflective notes. Data collection began in September of 2007 when Debbie started planning the school wide curriculum, Water Quality Symposium, and it concluded in December 2007. The teacher (Debbie) wrote reflective notes before and after the Water Quality Symposium (WQS) as a participant observer during the semester of planning and implementation. The teacher educator (Kim) collaborated with the process and participated in the curricular event experiencing a field trip to a farm with students. She also conducted interviews with the school principal, Debbie, a music teacher, and two focus group interviews with students. The purpose of the interviews was to gain the participants' insights into their experiences of the teacher-initiated school wide curricular event. Interview questions were semi-structured allowing ample room for variation in response, thus they sometimes became conversational (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). Kim took an "empathic approach" to the interviews, i.e., "an ethical stance in favor of the individual or group being studied" (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 696). The length of the interviews ranged from 40 minutes to an hour. All the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed by Kim and Debbie. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was gained in the beginning of the semester. Consent forms to participate were signed by interviewees on a volunteer basis.

Water Quality Symposium

The Water Quality Symposium is a school wide curriculum that took place on November 5, 2007 in Green Valley High School. A math teacher, Debbie, started planning this symposium as soon as the fall semester resumed. It involved the entire school, including Green Valley students, students from three neighboring high schools, and teachers. Reading Dewey in the curriculum theory class, Debbie contemplated on how Dewey emphasized the teachers' roles in knowing

both their students and their subject matter well enough that they could take students from where they were (in their experiences) to where they needed to go in the content. Debbie also wrestled with an idea of how to make the school an "organic whole, instead of a composite of isolated parts" (Dewey, 1915/2001, p. 55). Dewey said, "Relate the school to life, and all studies are of necessity correlated" (p. 55). Debbie wanted to implement a school-wide project that would make the school an "organic whole" that connects different subject matters to relate to students' lives. Debbie was also concerned about how her ideas would turn out, but Dewey (1915/2001) reminded her that:

> …it is only by trying that such things can be found out. To refuse to try, to stick blindly to tradition, because the search for the truth involves experimentation in the region of the unknown, is to refuse the only step which can introduce rational conviction into education. (p. 64)

Thus, Debbie wanted to do some "experimentation in the region of the unknown" and desired to make more meaningful contact with her students using mathematics instruction in the classroom. Debbie believed that to provide high quality mathematics instruction for all students was a matter of social justice as "to fail children in mathematics, or to let mathematics fail them, is to close off an important means of access to society's resources" (Schoenfeld, 2002, p. 13). Keeping this in mind, Debbie approached her Algebra I class with the essential question: How do I help my students relate Algebra with other subject matters and with their environment? She arranged the Algebra curriculum for the semester around helping students answer the question while meeting the course content standards. Then, she wondered about a topic that could benefit all the students at Green Valley and came up with the Water Quality Symposium as an "organic" curriculum. She thought water would be a common interest of the students who are living in a rural, farming area where Green Valley is located. Later, she decided to invite other students from three neighboring high schools impacted by the same creek watershed.

In terms of relating mathematics with other content areas, Debbie included science, business and technology, social studies, language arts, and fine arts. With assistance from another colleague, Debbie received approval from her principal and the superintendent early in the semester for this curriculum project. Upon approval, Debbie discussed this event with her colleagues at a faculty meeting and invited her Algebra I class of 13 students to begin planning with her, which included contacting local experts on the water issue, creating hands-on activities, organizing the event, and raising funds from the local community.

The Water Quality Symposium consisted of five different sessions: Session 1: Language Arts and Fine Arts where students were to create original work such as poetry and drawings inspired by their field trip; Session 2: Mathematics and Science where students were to take water samples and analyze data; Session 3: Social Studies where students were to discuss social issues impacting water quality; Session 4: Business and Technology where students were to study the city water plant; and Session 5: Producer Best Management Practice where students took a field trip to two farms. Each session was led collaboratively between teachers and 17 guest speakers from 11 local organizations related to water or environmental research.

The Water Quality Symposium started at 7:30 a.m. and concluded at 3:30 p.m. with a debriefing session where students were given opportunities to talk about their experiences and then engage in a question and answer session with the speakers. After the symposium, the local news media visited the school and interviewed students and Debbie asking about their

experiences. The evening news showed a recording of the interviews with complimentary remarks on the school event.

Voices of Different Stakeholders

In this section, we share our data in a story form employing *narrative analysis* (Polkinghorne, 1995; Barone, 2007) in which "voices" are reconstructed in a coherent way that makes sense to the reader. We use the metaphor of the voice here intentionally, as it is "a means for representing the *distinctiveness* of what otherwise is called a 'point-of-view'" (Holquist, 1994, p. 164, italics in original). These distinctive voices will allow each stakeholder to express him/herself as a representation of her/his own vantage point, while providing an opportunity for the reader to understand each stakeholder's standpoint.

We present five different voices: the principal; Mrs. Podroff (a teacher who was not part of planning); Debbie (the teacher-researcher); a group of students who was part of the planning team; and another group of students who was not part of the planning team.

Principal's Voice: "Our hands are tied a little bit."

> *When Debbie approached me to talk about her "grand" plan, my immediate concern was how to organize the event that takes a whole day and stop everything we were doing. I was also concerned about how to make the event fit what we've been doing, which was focusing on meeting AYP and state standards. But when Debbie convinced me how this one day curriculum project, Water Quality Symposium (By the way, I liked the topic very much), would incorporate as many state tested indicators, especially in math and reading, I didn't see any problem approving it. Whenever you can do something like this, the kids, when they have to sit in a classroom every day, day after day and go through basically the same routine, it does wear on the kids. When you can throw activities in like this, it gives them something to look forward to. It gives them another way of looking at things and get just more practical application of the things they're trying to study, and it's not just all book learning and note taking and so on. We've got to remember that students are going to get a lot more out of school if they enjoy coming. If you have a positive climate and activities like this, students will enjoy coming to school. If we just focus on the tested indicators and teaching to AYP and NCLB, it will bore the kids very quickly. I think activities like this, you know, is something they'll remember and they'll take with them. You do these things and try to incorporate as many state tested indicators into the activity as possible, and it will increase the students' academic performance. It's also just a way to keep the kids interested and energize them. Unfortunately, we're tied to certain things: AYP and what we have to teach. If AYP were not involved, if we didn't have to worry about AYP, I think what we want our students to get out of school is to take pride in learning and feel good about themselves and what knowledge can do for them. When we limit our education to AYP, we're going to limit our students' ambitions, their goals and desires, and what they want out of life. Currently, however, our hands are tied a little bit.*

Teacher's Voice (Mrs. Podroff): "I was more frustrated than anything."

I am a musical director in this school and have been teaching for 28 years here. Don't get me wrong. I love Debbie to death, and she worked really hard on this. She's always got great ideas, and she's been like that as long as I have known her. She just has a very dynamic personality. But I'm not really happy about how this curricula event came about and how it was implemented. I was more frustrated than anything because I wasn't sure what to do. If we were actually going to do something like this working with other subject matters, we should have spent more time planning. I think we had one faculty meeting where we first were told about the plan, and part of another faculty meeting where we kind of planned the whole thing. That was it. We were kind of on our own to figure things out. We didn't have a lot of planning. Debbie did most of it with a biology teacher who volunteered to help Debbie. I was one of the resisting teachers because I was not sure if I had the direction that I needed to have. I thought, my gosh, what do I have to do? I think we were all a little unsure about that. It was a little confusing. It was either a misunderstanding on our part or something, but I think Debbie tried to cover too many bases. I think it's a great thing, but I think we needed more than one faculty meeting for planning. Of course, I believe kids loved this. I think they are aware how we need to clean up our environment and clean up our water and how it impacts things in our area. These are all rural kids, so they kind of knew that. But I think it's good to remind them of that. I think they had a good time and enjoyed what they did.

Teacher-Researcher's Voice (Debbie): "I felt a sense of accomplishment."

Oh, boy, what a challenging project! I'm glad it's over. I was so worried. I was worried if everything would come together. As a matter of fact, my son, Austin, would tell you how awful I was at home during the "worry" period. Part of it is the image that you're worried about, you know. If it had gone badly, it would have looked bad for our school. You don't want to ruin the image of the school. It took several months to get this planned and approved by the principal and the superintendent. I'm so glad that it ended successfully. Right after Labor Day, I presented my proposal to the principal, then, he had to go get permission from the superintendent. Fortunately, neither of them had any problem with it. What made the administration buy into this project was the fact that I tied in the content of the Water Quality Symposium to our state assessment. I explained how math, science, and language arts components that would be tested on the assessment would be discussed in the project. That's how I had the administration buy into this idea. But my whole idea was to get my students out of the little box of a classroom. Especially, I wanted students who are not very classroom-oriented, the disengaged learners, to see their education in a different way. I wanted them to see the big picture, such as the community that they live in, and make a connection between their school learning and the community. I knew that this project would make a big impact on both students and the community, but I couldn't understand why some teachers wouldn't just hail this idea and jump onto the bandwagon. Oh, yeah, there were grumbling teachers who didn't want to participate in this project because they didn't know what they were supposed to do. This project must have been intimidating to them. So I tried to help them as much as possible with their lesson plans and stuff. All in all, it was an exhausting but exhilarating day in spite of some obstacles like money, weather, and teachers' somewhat negative attitudes, just to name a few. I felt that we had done something very important with our students

and guests. We showed them their place in the ecosystem and the values that are attached to the watershed. And we did it without administering a single pencil and paper assessment. I felt a sense of accomplishment. I only hope that this is not the end of the project, though. I hope its impact will be felt beyond November 5th.

Students' Voice (Group A)[1]: "It kind of opened our eyes."

The Water Quality Symposium is probably the biggest thing we've done in a long time. We were kind of experimenting. We learned that water is more important than we thought it was. We kind of take water for granted. It kind of opened our eyes. And it relates to everybody, not just one spot, but to every subject. It was tied into social studies, like the history on the dam in the creek. When the water quality issue was tied into arts and crafts and stuff, we paid more attention to that. And it helped us see how the water quality has to do with our farms. We also learned the latitudes and longitudes of other water places. We tied the water quality stuff with math and the stuff we're doing. We should have more events like this with a variety of topics, more social studies or geography to broaden the spectrum. Water quality is important, but it's not the only important environmental thing. For example, air quality or something that you are interested in and you want to learn more about. It is easier to do this because we're in a small school. Teachers spend more time with us and help us. There are more hands-on activities to do since there are fewer kids. This event pointed out that getting kids involved is important. And it lets us think how we can help prevent when the water is going to get bad. We can't make huge changes, but we can make little ones.

Students' Voice (Group B)[2]: "We had no idea. We just had to go."

We know this Water Quality Symposium was a big subject, and it's a great deal, but we're kids. There might be some kids who like it and are interested in that. We got to test water and that was pretty cool. A school event like this could be great but only if it is about something we all want. Water? Whoa! Water is not something that kids actually care about. We're concerned about what's going to happen the next night, not really about what's going on with the world like global warming and politics. Plus, we're farm kids, so we already know that water is important for us. Give us something we're interested in, like sports and stuff. Not everyone likes sports, but the majority of the kids do like sports. We wish they (planning team) had us work on this event for a few days and get prepared or give us some idea of what's going on. Kids who were involved with planning must have understood it better because they knew more about it. The algebra class kids were invited to plan this event. But we had no idea. We just had to go. Some kids didn't even come that day because they didn't want to sit there and didn't know what it was about or anything. We would've been probably a little more interested if we knew more about it. That's the main problem. We didn't know anything beforehand. We're good at planning. But we didn't really get any say in it. We could've crossed out the one we didn't want to do and had two things we wanted to do. If it were a different topic, it would have been more enjoyable. They should have asked every class their opinion about a topic or some ideas or something. Maybe like animal quality control or something. Get us involved and let us do what we wanna do.

Discussion

As we engage in curriculum theorizing to understand how the Water Quality Symposium is experienced by different stakeholders and to understand what the experience might mean for the field of curriculum studies in the current milieu of standardization, we see three main issues emerging from the data. They are: (1) Surprises that Challenge Our Assumptions; (2) Contrasting Curriculum Experiences; and (3) Educators' Dilemmas for Praxis.

Surprises that Challenge Our Assumptions

We first find ourselves coming across "surprises" through which we discover that "there is always another story, one we haven't necessarily bargained for" (Phillips, 1994, p. xxv). We find our assumptions about the success of the Water Quality Symposium are disrupted by the unexpected outcomes indicated in our data. As the local media hailed this curricular project as something innovative and educative for the students, we also believed that the Water Quality Symposium, as an "organic" curriculum, was quite successful in providing meaningful experiences for students as we related the curriculum to the students' lives. It turns out that it was so only to the "elite" group of students taking algebra who were the part of the planning team. However, to the other group that was not part of the curriculum planning, it was a school event that they "just had to go to" because they were told to. Seemingly, the Water Quality Symposium was only partially successful without reaching out to students who were not part of the planning team.

Such a discovery, that we inadvertently failed to engage some of the students in learning, the very students we wanted to serve, awakens us. We presumed that incorporating guest speakers and offering field trips and hands-on activities would ensure meaningful learning experiences for everyone, but we were mistaken. We made assumptions about students' learning based on our own experiences, frame of reference, and predictions, without allowing other possibilities. These "surprising" results remind us of the danger of generalizations about student learning that force us to accept students' learning outcomes unambiguously and uniformly. They also remind us of how students' learning outcomes can vary based on their own perceptions, experiences, and interests; hence, expecting standardized learning outcomes with uniformity is not possible. These surprises challenge us, helping to create a space where conflicts can be worked out and allowing room for "the multiplicity of possible interpretations" (Macintyre, 1977, p. 453).

Contrasting Curriculum Experiences

In the process of data analysis, we encountered opposing and contrasting experiences between the two student groups, Group A and B, and the two teachers, Mrs. Podroff and Debbie. First, there were different opinions about the topic of water. Student Group A thought that water was a great topic because they are "farm kids" who tend to take water for granted. On the other hand, Group B thought that water was not a good choice because they are "farm kids," so they "already know" that water is important to them. Second, there was a difference in experiences between those who were involved with planning and those who were not. Debbie felt a feeling of achievement and fulfillment while Mrs. Podroff had a feeling of frustration. Group A was engaged with the curriculum because they were "experimenting" with it while Group B was disengaged because they didn't have any "say" on the curriculum.

This contrasting nature of curriculum experiences helps us uncover the common root of the apparent opposites to find a better solution. To nurture better educational experiences for both

teachers and students, we need to strive for synthesis through the "internal dialectic" voices (Pinar, 2007, p. 174). The common root of the opposites in this case seems to be the planning process. We learn how important it is to have every stakeholder, including students and teachers, participate in curriculum planning and to let everyone have a "say" on it.

Educators' Dilemmas for Praxis

Praxis is a particular kind of action that informs and guides the actions of educators (Kemmis & Smith, 2008). According to Kemmis & Smith (2008), praxis is "what people do when they take into account all the circumstances and exigencies that confront them at a particular moment and then, taking the broadest view they can of what it is *best* to do, they *act"* (p. 4, italics in original). However, they believe that praxis in education today is endangered to the extent that educational practice has become just "rule following" while losing sight of the moral agency of the educator. In the act of rule following, the educator may become no more than the operative part of a system in which they work.

Not surprisingly, the principal's comment, "our hands are tied a little bit," indicates how the educator's praxis is disabled and thus endangered due to imposed mandates under NCLB. It acknowledges the difficulties and challenges that both administrators and teachers encounter in the era of standardization, where meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and accountability measured by standardized test scores becomes the priority. The principal's modest expression, "a little bit," sounds rhetorical in that it amplifies the confinement that he and his teachers are feeling. It is "unfortunate" that educators feel "tied to certain things" like AYP and in what they have to teach. Hence, they cannot provide learning experiences that students can "take pride in." The "tied hands" signify how the teachers' agencies and their abilities to imagine what it means to be a good educator are arrested; further, their praxis is endangered to the extent that they limit their education to meeting AYP at the expense of their students' ambitions, goals, and desires.

However, it is not just "external censors" (McConaghy & Boomfield, 2004, p. 94), such as AYP that curtail possibilities for teachers to engage in their praxis. Teacher praxis is limited when teachers are not involved with curriculum planning for the school or school district. For example, Mrs. Podroff mentions that she was more frustrated than anything because she was not sure what to do, as she was not given enough time for curriculum planning. She was one of the "resisting teachers" because she was not sure what direction she needed to have. According to Mrs. Podroff, she was not the only one who was confused about this school wide curriculum because teachers did not have a lot of planning, but "Debbie did most of it." It is clear that teachers were experiencing a dilemma for praxis, not knowing what to do; they should have been given more time to plan, deliberate, and collaborate on this project.

In the midst of this dilemma, though, it is important to point out how the principal attempts to find ways to think beyond rule following. The principal believes that a curriculum project like the Water Quality Symposium would enhance students' interests in learning. But it cannot be free from standards and test indicators. Whatever we do, we must incorporate the standards and test indicators into the curriculum, and this is how Debbie was able to get permission from the principal and the superintendent. Teachers and the principal confront dilemmas for praxis in the era of NCLB and standardization; however, they do not lose sight of their opportunity for praxis.

Concluding Remarks: A Coda

According to Bruner (2002), a coda is the retrospective evaluation of what it (research text) all might mean. It is a feature that recapitulates the research text from "the there and then of the narrative to the here and now of the telling, and to the future of the telling" (p. 20). Therefore, a coda is a way to answer the "so what?" question. So, how do we make sense of our research findings? What are the implications for education and the field of curriculum studies in particular?

Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman (1995/2008) note that the field of curriculum is about what happens in schools in relation to the world and pays close attention to the language that is used by educators and scholars in the field. They also note that the field of curriculum is no longer preoccupied with development, rather, it is preoccupied with *understanding*. To understand means we, both curricular theorists and practitioners, are no longer technicians "who accept unquestioningly others' priorities" (p. 6). Therefore, to understand the curriculum field is to understand it as "discourse, as text, and most simply but profoundly, as words and ideas" (p. 7).

As we transit from data collection to theorizing and as we make sense of the polyphony of the different voices, we find that curriculum is never a unified experience. We begin to understand that it is experienced as a polyphonic text that is multidimensional, disclosing the layers of complexity among different experiences of stakeholders. As we tap into the polyphonic text, we discover some of the layers of complexity as surprises that we did not necessarily "bargain for," and they make us puzzle and ponder. The layers of complexity that we find, such as surprises that challenge our assumptions, contrasting curriculum experiences; and educators' dilemmas for praxis, open up a possibility for us to question the hegemony of the standards-based reform movement and how such practice is questionable and problematic. They have significant implications for curriculum in the era of standardization.

First, understanding curriculum as a polyphonic text can provide a counter-hegemonic insight into the domination of the meta-narrative of standardization. According to Bakhtin (1963/1984), a *polyphony* is "a plurality of independent, unmerged voices and consciousness" (p. 6). In the polyphonic text, different voices are heard without having one voice privileged over the others. The polyphonic text produces no final, complete truth, but unfinalizable truths that are open to potentiality, freedom, creativity, and surprise, evolving from the interaction among participants. Bakhtin (1975/1981) also argues that the society consists of both "centripetal" (or "official") and "centrifugal" (or "unofficial") forces. The former seeks to impose order on an essentially heterogeneous and messy world; the latter, generally speaking messy and disorganized, continually disrupts that order (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 30). Movements for standardization and accountability are centripetal, official forces that are intended to "tidy up a messy system" (Eisner, 2009, p. 327). However, the polyphony of the curriculum experiences presented here can be considered centrifugal forces that are divergent from the "official," challenging the unified order of standardization while bringing diversified meaningful experiences of stakeholders to the forefront. More important, understanding curriculum as a polyphonic text can work as a centrifugal force that puts an emphasis on individual stakeholders, such as teachers, administrators, students, and parents who are the main players of curriculum implementation. We can no longer use the yardstick of the standardization, which is the one unified official, centripetal force, to determine the meaningfulness of a curriculum.

Second, understanding curriculum as a polyphonic text can provide educators with an opportunity for praxis in the era of standards and standardization. The demands from the

standards-based reform for accountability create unity, oneness, sameness, or epic consciousness in Bakhtinian term. According to Bakhtin (1975/1981), in the epic world, diversity and change either go unrecognized or are actively suppressed. He writes, "The epic world is constructed in the zone of an absolute, distanced image, beyond the sphere of possible contact with the developing, incomplete and therefore re-thinking and re-evaluating present" (p. 17). Thus, epic tradition is analogous to authoritative, not allowing individual agency and autonomy to emerge and evolve. With the standards-based reform, teachers and administrators feel that their "hands are tied" for being in this epic world where fidelity to the prepackaged, prescribed curriculum is mandated for the sake of accountability and measurement. The hidden curriculum here is that teachers are not capable of being decision makers, while serving as no more than the operative of the school in which they work.

Curriculum as a polyphonic text that embraces a plurality of independent, unmerged voices and consciousness, and thus denies the epic world, allows educators to work with their agency, engaging in praxis despite the demands of standardization. At the heart of praxis is the distinction between being an agent and being an operative (Kemmis & Smith, 2008). For example, Debbie, the practitioner-researcher, is a representative of many other unknown teachers who deserve to be acknowledged, if you will. Debbie resists becoming a technician who is subjugated by mandates and regulations. She exercises her own autonomy and agency in creating a school wide curriculum in spite of the demands of standardization. Debbie's experience as a teacher and a curriculum scholar shows how teachers are creative decision makers who can inform the scholarship of education research. Debbie reflects:

> *Since the implementation of this project required the entire faculty of Green Valley High School, it was quite difficult and fraught with complications, miscommunications and hurt feelings. But in the end, I experienced a sense of accomplishment unlike anything I have felt before. I feel a kinship now both with the researcher and the classroom teacher and can understand the dichotomy that exists between the two. Caring, ethical teachers and researchers will look for ideas to help meet the needs of all students.* (Debbie's reflective journal, November 11, 2007)

Through curriculum planning and implementation of the Water Quality Symposium, Debbie feels the "kinship" both with the researcher and the classroom teacher, determining what is best for her students through her agency. We know that Debbie is just one example of a myriad of teachers who are the agents of praxis, making a difference in their students' lives.

Finally, understanding curriculum as a polyphonic text invites more collaborative theorizing efforts between curricular theorists and practicing teachers. Traditionally, the voices of practitioners have been closed off in the field of curriculum studies. It has been noted that what is missing in the field of curriculum studies are the teachers themselves (Miller, 2005), which leaves curriculum theorists and practitioners "looking at each other from a distance" (Pinar, 2007, p. 33), widening the gap between theory and practice. For Kim, the teacher educator, for example, this theorizing effort was a humbling experience as she learned first hand what it takes to plan a curriculum that is school wide in the midst of standardization, how challenging but how laudable it is for a teacher to create a curriculum in an effort to put theory into practice, and how teachers are in the trenches battling with the traditions and the language of standards in particular. Indeed, this collaboration provided both of us an opportunity to challenge and problematize our own research and practice in relation to curriculum and helped us find ways to broaden the horizon of

our curriculum theory, hoping to contribute to the field of curriculum studies. Working together between the teacher educator and the classroom teacher helps theory grounded in practice and practice grounded in theory. Hence, no longer looking at each other from a distance.

In short, theorizing curriculum as a polyphonic text offers multiple possibilities. It is unfinalizable, indeed.

Notes

1. Group A is a group of 13 students who participated in curriculum planning.
2. Group B is a group of 12 students who did NOT participate in curriculum planning.

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