

M2T2: Response Paper #1: Interview of Key Stakeholders

I served as a history teacher in a school district in Southeastern Washington for 12 years until 2014, I went through one curriculum adoption process there and helped create a class for the introduction of Social Studies, entitled World Geography by the Curriculum Director, during my time at the small district. I thought I had a pretty firm grasp on exactly what the curriculum adoption process entailed. I was wrong. Upon changing districts to one of the largest districts in Southeastern Washington which includes several elementary schools, both traditional and STEM, three of the largest middle schools in the region, and two of the biggest high schools in the Tri-Cities which also includes home-schooling and alternative schooling services, I got a quick refocusing on the complexity of curriculum and curriculum adoption. My experience had to do with being trained on a new overarching curriculum for the middle school English which included the Charlotte Danielson model, Read180, and from discussing the adoption of a new Washington State History curriculum. From my interviews, which took me longer than anticipated due to changing districts and school just starting this year, it became clear that there are three major stakeholders in the curriculum adoption process. First, the “power-brokers” are the people who are largely involved in the politics of curriculum creation and adoption. Next, you have the community which can include different swaths and interests that encompass any community in the United States. Finally, the teachers are responsible for implementation, modification, and differentiation of the curriculum within the school district.

Probably the most powerful, yet least known about group of people who dictate the curriculum adoption process are the “power brokers” and this takes the form of a true

bureaucratic body. At the highest level is the Department of Education and the standards that they set and disseminate throughout the states. While each state is free to create sub-standards within the federally adopted mandates, those sub-standards cannot be set to contradict, minimize, or discourage the federal objectives. In states like Washington State, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) is responsible for spending tax dollars to support teaching and learning and create and maintain a viable infrastructure to embrace and meet federal goals, the days of state autonomy in education seem to have come to an end.

While governors and state representatives may allocate tax dollars to support teaching and learning, several states have an “education czar” that is meant to oversee the well-being of state educational performance, in Washington State this is the Superintendent of Public Instruction. From a bureaucratic model, the power of the OSPI is filtered down to school districts who have their own curriculum director and then finally to specific buildings where school administrators and instructional coaches are meant to support the implementation, well-being, and permanency of the adopted curriculum. This means that, at the building level, administrators and literacy coaches must be aware of “rogue” teachers and those who may only tacitly support the adopted curriculum.

One area that caught me completely off guard was the involvement of the teacher-unions. I had no idea that part of union negotiations involved curriculum and curriculum adoption. As a new teacher to the district, one who did not pay for union representation in prior years; so, therefore was not represented in recent negotiations, I felt I had no recourse to pursue being involved in curriculum or curriculum adoption. An odd moment for me, since I had previously considered curriculum to be simply just adopting the best identified model for meeting teaching

and learning goals instead of a political football. In short, at this moment, I realized that curriculum and curriculum adoption was far more intricate than I had previously thought.

Of course, given all of the different people and groups that make a community, it is not surprising that these people who support school districts via taxes want to be included, if not involved, in curriculum adoption. This makes further since given all the different individuals that these groups represent which may include, but are not limited to concerns based on gender, religion, race, sexual orientation, political influence, post-educational expectations, and several others. In an era where the most vocal members of a community seem to be suspicious of public education rather than supportive it is not unexpected that these same people would assume that there is a hidden agenda driving the choice of certain curricula over others.

Further, this suspicion extends all the way to the federal government and some taxpayers question who is earning wealth when large states or districts adopt the curriculum provided by a given private company. Basically, if a large district or state adopts a curriculum there are millions of dollars to be made in hard-copy materials, technological support, and the services of consultants in introducing and implementing new curricula; therefore, some people assume it is another simple case of the powerful leveraging public education in order to maintain power and protect access to wealth.

Behind all of these complex arguments, however, one cannot forget that there are simply some parents and citizens who view public education as what it is supposed to be, the great equalizer. These citizens hope to be involved in a democratic and open process that protects social mobility by providing equitable and universal access to education. Often, these people do not fall into the groups outlined above, although lines sometimes do blur; rather, they are those members of a society who hope that all children deserve a sound education that minimizes

federal involvement, is free from special interest, and provides equal and fair treatment and establishes high expectations for all students. All of these different groups must be considered when going through the curriculum adoption or creation process in order to be proactive instead of reactive against community concerns toward public education.

The final but perhaps most important stakeholder in curriculum adoption and creation is the teacher. Most teachers are the people who strive to create equal and fair environments, set high expectations for students, and hope to use education to create avenues for social mobility. In order to achieve all of this it is necessary for teachers to advocate for and protect autonomy. If a teacher feels that an adopted curriculum is not meeting the standards that it says it does, they should be given the freedom and support to rectify either their understanding of the curriculum and material or to modify the given assignments to better meet the standards that they plan to accomplish.

Further, teachers are bombed by different theories of learning like Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligence, Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development, Nell Noddings' emphasis on critical thinking, and others; so, to simply say that these are not important acts to essentially say the teacher, as a professional, is not important. Additionally, given the influence of such things like the US News and World Report ratings of top schools in the education and the success of programs like AVID, GLAD, and others approaches to teaching and learning, teachers are sometimes confused about what their schools' curriculum identity, approach, and goals are. Granted, in an effort to address some of the confusion from this identity crisis schools have implemented Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), Mentorship Programs, New Teacher Orientation, and continued training in new teaching and learning strategies, curricular technological support, and access to curriculum coaches. Given that in some districts, however,

unions are involved in curriculum adoption, it is not surprising that teachers who feel alienated by, are not interested in, or otherwise avoid political involvement in their jobs do not wish to navigate the existing structures to be involved in curriculum creation and adoption. It is safe to say that schools are attempting to put all of the pieces together to include teachers in the curriculum adoption and creation process; sadly, perhaps the most important voice in this process, the teacher, is the one that also carefully or perhaps purposefully suppressed by the power-brokers and community.

All things considered, curriculum development and curriculum creation are purposely and necessarily complex things; after all, it is what we are teaching the most vulnerable but most important members of the teaching and learning process, the student. Given the importance of the tax-dollar and the birth of global competitions the federal and state governments have become more involved in setting educational standards which find their way to the teacher via a bureaucratic structure. Private citizens through special interest groups or just out of the kindness of their heart or belief in the righteousness of public education also want to be involved for a variety of good and questionable reasons, they also must be considered in the process because they are tax-payers, social advocates, and district constituents. Finally, the role of the teacher and their expertise in pedagogy as well as the consistency and constancy of work with the students should also be included but as highlighted above this involvement must be carefully managed but, hopefully, inviting and not alienated. To summarize, curriculum adoption, curriculum creation, and curriculum modification is a political football and must be treated as such by curriculum directors..