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Curriculum Integration: Walking the Walk

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Abstract

Curriculum integration is a hallmark of middle level education. This approach to education involves blending topics across content areas as a way of studying topics and problems of interest to young adolescents. Approaches to curriculum integration and interdisciplinary curriculum overlap with concepts like democratic education, place-based learning, student agency, and student-designed curriculum. Here, two teacher educators report on a recent initiative in which we co-designed integrated curriculum along with middle level teacher candidates. We drew on place-based instruction and models of collaboration to develop this project. Candidates then developed integrated units appropriate for middle school classrooms.

Introduction

Discovery can happen in the most ordinary moments. During a routine data day for our middle grades teacher preparation program, we found a hidden treasure that would prompt us to resurrect a project that had been a program staple. The high-stakes, high-stress pressure of edTPA had led to the project being buried; that is, until we found it in an old unlocked cabinet.

The project stood out on the empty shelves of the dilapidated cabinet because it was a large stack of printed paper, which is a foreign object in our program today. Curious of the contents between the 2-inch binder clip, we flipped through the pages. It was obvious to everyone in the room--including our associate dean, who had participated in the creation and facilitation of the project, and an alumna of the program who joined us that day as a community partner--that we had found a forgotten project from the early 2000s. Through excited explanations, we learned about the field trips that had been conducted to provide the collaborative student groups inspiration for interdisciplinary unit plans.

These reactions created our idea. We began to ask about this former project and found some resurrected interest. Although there had been enthusiasm and a strong rationale for these interdisciplinary and integrated projects, attention in the program had shifted towards the rigors of edTPA in more recent years. We began to explore the possibility of an updated version of this project. However, we realized that a new version of such a project needed to be grounded in the realities of preparing middle level teachers for the classrooms of today and tomorrow. The purpose of this paper is to document how we designed a collaborative process for teacher

candidates to draw on place-based resources to create integrated and interdisciplinary curriculum.

Project Inspiration

We crafted an updated version of the project, drawing on guidelines for middle level curriculum, collaboration, and place-based education. According to *This We Believe* (National Middle School Association, 2010) curriculum for young adolescents should be relevant, exploratory, challenging-- and integrative. Themes, guiding questions, and place-based learning are some of the ways to organize integrated and interdisciplinary curriculum (Beane, 1997; Bennet et al., 2016; Nesin & Lounsbury, 2019; Springer, 2006; Wall & Leckie, 2017).

The collaboration across content areas was a key component in the stories shared with us about the former project iterations. The stories described the project's ability to expose everyone, candidates and faculty alike, to true collaboration. Knowing that collaboration is a salient factor in middle level teaching (Association for Middle Level Education, 2012; Dooner et al., 2008; Graziano & Navarrete, 2012; NMSA, 2010), we planned to keep the collaborative nature of the project. We further wanted to model a collaborative process for our teacher candidates to support their agency and identities as educators (Massey & Wall, 2020). This collaboration would focus on two common community sites, where teacher candidates would co-create a collaborative unit plan framed by guidelines for middle level integrated curriculum (AMLE, 2012; NMSA, 2010), designed across Language Arts, Science, Math, and Social Studies state standards, and built on the equitable properties of place-based learning.

Place-based learning “decenters the traditional classroom as the sole locus of learning and emphasizes the value of learning within varied spatial frameworks including undeveloped natural environments and built environments in rural, suburban, or urban communities” (Estey, 2014, p. 122). Through decentering the classroom and assembling a curricular team focused on tying their standards to local history and cultural heritage, teachers are capable of pedagogical practices that are culturally sustaining and socially just (Paris, 2012). This was a main goal for this endeavor. We thought by facilitating this type of project we would be able to encourage teacher candidates to draw on their communities and colleagues to create standards-based learning experiences while enacting culturally sustaining and socially just pedagogies within the school.

Project Goals

As teacher educators, we participated in this project alongside our teacher candidates. Our goal was to model a process in which field trips within the community can grant candidates access to what theory suggests about place-based learning. Candidates are able to directly gauge whether or not visiting community spaces would allow their students to see themselves in the curriculum, bear witness to the historical events of their community, learn outside of the classroom, and make real-world connections authentically (Estey, 2014; MacGregor, 2012; Santelmann, 2011; Sgouros & Stirn, 2016). In line with the purpose of place-based learning, candidates investigated our community's connections to the institution of slavery and the slave trade through two community spaces, the required Georgia standards. We further linked these topics to the United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals and the National Academy of Engineering's (NAE) Grand Challenges; these two frameworks were introduced based on similar initiatives in different middle schools.

We invited eight undergraduate middle grades teacher candidates to take part in this project. These candidates were selected based on their level of preparation: each had completed one extended field experience and was at the start of their second extended field experience prior to student teaching. These candidates had studied interdisciplinary and integrated curriculum, and they had each designed a week-long unit in their first extended field experience. Through this project, we hoped that the teacher candidates would enhance their knowledge and skills for planning interdisciplinary and integrated curriculum through a collaborative process. As teacher educators, we also hoped to update a program key assessment focused on middle level teaching and learning, so we invited these candidates to join us on our evaluation of the potential this project could have in their growth as teachers.

All eight candidates identify as women. With primary and secondary concentrations that span all four academic subjects in our program, all eight are able to provide sound judgment when planning within the domains of science, social studies, English language arts (ELA), and math through the state standards. They are all due to student teach in the Fall of 2020. Consequently, at this stage in the program, they have been exposed to interdisciplinary teaching, culturally sustaining pedagogies, socially just practices, and place-based learning. Of the eight candidates, three chose Science as their primary concentration, three chose Math, one chose ELA, and one chose Social Studies. Through initial conversations with the candidates, we explained our goals as teacher educators and listened to their concerns related to planning. From these conversations, we determined possible locations for site visits and mapped out a plan for the semester that included site visits, collaborative planning meetings, and creation and sharing of curriculum plans. This project is supported by a National Youth-at-Risk Research Support Grant. Because the Spring 2020 semester was impacted by COVID-19, the nature of our collaboration shifted.

Bringing Theory into Practice



To decenter the classroom as the authority on how the city of Savannah, Georgia, participated in the institution of slavery, we planned a visit to two sites. We listened to historians explain how enslaved persons lived in our community. First, we visited the preserved mansion known as the Owens-Thomas House & Slave Quarters. The house is described as “an impressive two-story structure on a raised basement, [which] was completed in 1819 for Richard Richardson (1765–1833), an entrepreneur, shipping merchant, domestic slave trader, and bank president, and his wife, Frances Bolton Richardson” (Telfair Museums, n.d., n.p.). This community space showed the candidates the stark contrast existent in the living quarters of wealthy versus enslaved persons. From there, we walked to the Beach Institute, which sits in the oldest remaining African-American neighborhood in Savannah. The Institute, built in 1867, houses the

oldest surviving school for newly freed persons in Savannah (Beach Institute, n.d.). Here, our candidates were exposed to art composed by and in honor of the African Americans as well as stories rooted in the empowerment and agency found within the education of freed African Americans in their community.

By designating purpose on community spaces, “renewal and reconnection” (MacGregor, 2012, p. 7) can be awakened in community members. In order to *create* renewal and reconnection, teachers must interject the curriculum into their community spaces. Through this, students reconnect with their community and find a new purpose for those spaces.

Standards & Guidelines

As stated above, visiting these community spaces was only the first step to the candidates’ analysis of and participation in the project. After the day in Savannah, the collaborative work of selecting standards, balancing content, and seeking overlapping content and skills began. To organize several ideas across multiple content areas, we encouraged students to develop an essential question (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998) and to determine a central theme. Additionally, we embedded their interdisciplinary unit plan in the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals and National Academy of Engineering’s Grand Challenges because these frameworks offer candidates an integrated enduring understanding and exhibit the equitable properties of place-based learning.

The UN’s goals were built upon a shared vision and shared goals placing people and the planet at the center (United Nations, n.d.), and the NAE’s challenges are engineering goals that are focused on improving the lives in our communities through imaginative plans for sustainable, secure, healthy, and joyful living (National Academy of Engineering, n.d.). In both lists, students’ learning is moved from the classroom to the community to expose them to the connections their learning has within the community. Candidates discussed and collaboratively chose one goal or challenge from the list to use as their integrated enduring understanding, essential question, and central theme. After this, candidates chose the standards most appropriate to that understanding and their primary academic concentration. Finally, the students plan a series of lessons that incorporate progressive instructional strategies building to a project-based summative assessment. Although impacts of COVID-19 shifted our plans in practice, we plan to continue this work in the future, where we anticipate observable moments of collaboration among our candidates and evaluative rubrics for our expectations of their teaching and learning.

Conclusion

Providing teacher candidates an opportunity to collaborate with their peers to create similar learning experiences for their future students is a powerful tool in teacher education. Practically, it allows for teacher educators to bridge the theory practice gap; it illustrates what the theoretical intentions are for their future practice; and it establishes a faculty-like relationship among a cohort of teacher candidates. Because this is an exploratory initiative, we plan to observe if these practicalities are the result of the candidates’ collaborative work. With our candidates’ help to assess whether or not this is the fruitful project it once was, we will determine to incorporate it as a key assessment with future candidates at the same stage in our program.

The experiences of teachers described in Tallman (2019) make us think this project is a worthwhile endeavor today. In Tallman’s pilot project, five inservice teachers found great success using a collaborative interdisciplinary planning project to instill “mutuality, trust, and

growth” (p. 1). Teachers were able to create a sense of community that supported their developing pedagogical knowledge alongside each other. Our hope is that a project like this will carry a similar disposition forward in our teacher candidates as they complete the program. That is why the project has been resurrected. We want to find an effective way to create collaboration in action in order to inform our candidates’ professional identity development. Through a project that is student-driven, purposeful, connected, and relevant, candidates are able to establish a foundation for collaboration as preservice teachers.

To return to the beginning story, the alumna teacher who joined our data day gives us hope that engaging teacher candidates in place-based integrated and interdisciplinary curriculum will impact their practices in their future classrooms. More than simply going back to the future, we have endeavored to anchor this project in current goals for teacher candidates to unite many aspects of their program through a collaborative experience. Since it can be a challenge to transform theory into practice, it is our hope that this experience affords our candidates to draw on social justice, reflective practice, and collaboration to engage in developmentally responsive teaching and learning.

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