

The Employment of Ethical Decision-Making Frameworks in Educational Change

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Abstract

In this article, the author provides a prefacing narrative that examines the work of Simpson et al. (2004, this issue), situating the reader as the importance of a framework for curriculum design. Importantly, the author illuminates a set of democratic values that animate the framework, and which work to instruct a democratic ethic of curriculum design.

Introduction

In the original call for this themed issue of the *Scholar-Practitioner Quarterly*, two questions were raised that are addressed by the article, “Toward a Democratic Ethic of Curricular Decision-Making—A Guide for Educational Practitioners.” What is the relationship of social justice and democracy? And, what is meant by “Taking a Stand” on social justice and democracy? In their proposal, Simpson et al. (2004) indirectly define democracy through the social justice concepts and processes that are inherent in their framework. In relation to both questions, those educational practitioners who would utilize this framework are participating in a process that not only promotes social justice but also defines democracy as a socially just enterprise. In essence, by their participation, they are taking an ethical stance on the design of curriculum, the development of their students as critically aware and participatory citizens, and on the promotion of a socially just and caring democratic society.

On one level, this framework proposes decision-making considerations that

are included in most, if not all, curriculum design initiatives. However, one way in which it differs is in its explicit promotion of democratic values. Many individuals have argued that all curriculum is value-laden, and therefore, designed to reproduce a specific value system. When curriculum design is a locally controlled process, the result is a curriculum that closely aligns with the values of the local community. Likewise, standardized curriculum that is imposed by a governmental body, such as a state or nation, or curriculum that is promoted by a professional organization also is grounded in the values of the external agency or special interest group. In both local or centralized curriculum design and implementation, there is no guarantee that democratic principles guide this process, or are embedded within the process to facilitate the reproduction of a democratic society. This raises the question of what is the purpose of public education?

Historically, education has been used to achieve many different purposes. For instance, many individuals ranging from Herbert Kliebard (1995) to Joel Spring (2001) have documented attempts by various interests to use public education as a means to promote various visions of American democracy, or to use public education to promote a specific political, cultural, economic, or social goal. Often, these values and their consequences are not extensively debated, or even critically recognized by the practitioners who implement this curriculum or by the stakeholders who are affected by the reform. On an instrumental level, practitioners do engage these curriculum initiatives with an evaluation of their impact on the: local educational context that relates to the aims of the local school and community, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and the students. However, the comprehensive and ethically grounded inquiry framework proposed by Simpson et al. (2004) transforms the evaluation process to a critically pragmatic level that is tightly focused on the promotion of a democratic society.

Their proposal is important for a number of reasons. First, large-scale curricular initiatives are often not subjected to a degree of public debate that facilitates a significant and critical awareness of the values that ground the initiative. For instance, only within the last year has significant public debate begun about the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). As the states move forward with their compliance programs, individuals are becoming increasingly critically aware of the effects of this reform. What motivates their participation in this debate is the conflict between the foundational values of specific aspects of NCLB and their own values as reflected in certain educational practices and outcomes. In addition, the concern of the public about the degree of national, state, and local control of education is an issue that has significant implications for the promotion of social justice and the definition of a democratic society. Prior to the passage of NCLB, the debate that occurred between government officials and other individuals interested in educational policy was couched in generalizations that were acceptable to a wide range of the citizenry. Much of the criticism of the specific and technical aspects of this reform approach and plan occurred within the scholarly community, and was

mostly inaccessible to not only the general public but also to many educational practitioners. If a participatory democracy requires participation by the public in policy decisions, than frameworks such as Simpson et al.'s (2004) inherently require the participation of educational practitioners, and can be extended to include other educational stakeholders such as students, parents, and other community members. The importance of this type of framework lies in its requirement that the participants confront the competing perspectives and the foundational values of these perspectives in relation to all of the components of an educational system.

Secondly, the use of frameworks such as this ensures the inclusion of a critical component in the design of educational systems. Even though the design of curricular initiatives may involve a systemic design process to improve the chances of implementation, stakeholder participation is often limited, and both the local values and any externally imposed values are not critically interrogated. A systems design process can be used by a relatively select and small group of decision makers to increase the possibility of a successful implementation. In cases like this, the role of the other stakeholders is to often merely to implement reform without any participation in the design process. Another design process, idealized systems design (Banathy, 1991, 1996), requires stakeholder participation in all levels of the change process starting with the identification of the fundamental and hence guiding principles and values. In this sort of change process, values clarification unfolds with the construction of the vision and continues throughout the design process. The framework proposed by Simpson et al. (2004) is, on a smaller scale, conceptually aligned with the participatory and value awareness of an idealized systems design process.

Finally, decision making frameworks that are ethically oriented require educators, and whoever else that may participate, to engage educational change with an informed concern for the development of reflective, caring, and participatory democratic citizens. The motivation to engage the change process with informed concern is located within the enumerated points of this framework. To consider all of these points requires the participants to extend their knowledge and critically interrogate all of the values that arise from their comprehensive inquiry into the purpose and nature of the change situation. In other words, a comprehensive, informed, and disciplined inquiry of this kind is precisely the kind of process utilized by scholar-practitioners.

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