

## **Toward<sup>1</sup> a Democratic Ethic of Curricular Decision-Making: A Guide<sup>2</sup> for Educational Practitioners<sup>3</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

In this article, the authors present a philosophical exploration of the import of a democratic ethic in making decisions concerning curricula. Specifically, the authors offer a guide for ethical decision making that is concerned with promoting fairness and acting on social justice principles. The ethical responsibilities of educators are explored, focusing on an examination of how various contexts play a role in informing educators about curricula.

### **Preamble**

Educators<sup>5</sup> frequently make decisions about both curricular means (materials, experiences, studies, methodologies, environments) and curricular ends (ideals, goals, aims, objectives). In the process, they make many value judgments, some intentionally and others unintentionally. Whether debating, designing, developing, or delivering classroom curricula or influencing the broader school, district, and community curricula, issues arise, values are or should be debated, and decisions are made. In the midst of these discussions and choices, questions arise about the intentions that guide our decisions, the content that supports them, the processes that

complement both our intentions and the content, and the outcomes we intend to foster. In order to make these debates and decisions thoughtfully, the educator often needs to make the unconscious conscious, the covert overt, and the private public. The justification of curricular decisions, therefore, needs to become an expectation of the educator and other stakeholders involved in the process. An important basis for making many of these decisions is a democratic philosophy of life and education:<sup>6</sup> one that embodies numerous procedural and substantive values, such as creating a climate for freedom of thought and discussion, ensuring an appreciation for independent thinking, manifesting an equal respect for persons, considering the ideas and interests of everyone, cultivating equity in society, examining ideas and truth claims whether popular or not, promoting fairness for individuals, and acting on social justice principles.

This philosophical starting point ideally will support educators as questions that fall within the ethical domain are raised, i.e., queries that entail explicit or implicit “ought” or “should” statements. Being ethically responsible, therefore, entails several activities, including: (1) making the values embedded in ought statements explicit, (2) identifying the specific philosophical rationale for the value statements, (3) ensuring that the process is a deliberate and reflective one, and (4) including representative voices in curricular discussions. For example, it may be important to ask: (a) who should be involved in making curricular decisions; (b) what values, studies, interpretations, and peoples should be included in the curricula; (c) how the goals, aims, and objectives of schools should be determined, pursued and evaluated; (d) when outcomes should be focused on internal states (understandings, appreciations, dispositions) and on external behavior (performances and competencies); (e) which potentialities and abilities of the child should be cultivated by the school; (f) how much weight should be placed on the selected aims, abilities, studies, and experiences; and (g) whether political, economic, religious, ideological, and philosophical beliefs should be influencing factors in the construction of curricular policy, plans, and practices.

Given the influence of society and its agencies and institutions, educators recognize that many curricula—formal and informal, explicit and implicit, official and unofficial, desired and learned, taught and tested, known and unknown, accepted and omitted—exist and influence children and youth. Some of these curricula are somewhat beyond the direct examination and influence of educators *qua* educators, but all acceptable school curricula should fall partially within its educational mission, namely that of developing reflective, caring, and choosing people. Other curricular questions—including but not limited to, decisions about course content, student assignments, classroom environment, and pedagogical methodology—are more obviously within the direct responsibilities of educators. The ethical responsibilities of educators, therefore, are numerous and important for the well being of the student as a person and as a citizen, the respect and development of the profession, and the growth of society as a democratic entity.

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Believing that every child deserves both respect and an appropriate high quality education, that the health and progress of society partially depends upon the school striving for democratic ideals, and that the educator is a significant factor in the pursuit and realization of these values, the following ideas regarding contexts, aims, students, studies, methodology, materials, and evaluation are important to think about when making curricular decisions.<sup>7</sup>

## **Decisions and Contexts**

When making curricular decisions, various contexts play a role in informing educators about ethical concerns. Among the overlapping realms that impinge upon ethical decision-making are the classroom, school, community, and broader social and world contexts. Consequently, educators should listen critically to the thinking of colleagues, parents, and other stakeholders as curricula are developed and should utilize as a part of the student's overall curricular experience the personal and cultural richness of:

- 1.1 the classroom;
- 1.2 the local school;
- 1.3 the local community;
- 1.4 the broader society and nation; and
- 1.5 the world communities.

On the other hand, educators should not allow the classroom, school, community, and broader social contexts to exclude or trivialize well-founded and emerging forms of inquiry and creativity, e.g., scientific, historical, mathematical, and artistic studies or personal and cultural understandings.<sup>8</sup> Nor should they allow traditions, fads, or ideologies to dictate specific interpretations of these forms of inquiry and creativity and personal and cultural understandings or prescribe narrowly defined pedagogical processes and curricular experiences.

## **Decisions and Aims**

Educators should examine the considered opinions of others on educational aims when making curricular plans. Consequently, educators, when making decisions, should consider:

- 2.1 the historical development of educational aims;
- 2.2 the vision and mission of the school;
- 2.3 the concerns, views, and ideals of the community;
- 2.4 the thinking, understandings, and judgments of students;
- 2.5 the nature of forms of inquiry and creativity and personal and cultural understandings;

- 2.6 the acceptability of procedural and methodological actions; and
- 2.7 the justifiability of aims.

On the other hand, educators should not assume that articulated voices represent everyone in a group or community, still less the uncommunicative voices of a classroom, school, or community. Nor should they assume that the aims, concerns, thoughts, and judgments of any individual, group, or institution are sacrosanct.

### **Decisions and Students**

Educators should develop a conception of human nature that affirms the intrinsic worth of students and the importance of their abilities and development. Consequently, educators should listen reflectively to students as curricular decisions are made and take measures to ensure:

- 3.1 the developmental level of each student is considered;
- 3.2 the interests and strengths of each student are guided and cultivated;
- 3.3 the needs and challenges of each student are addressed; and
- 3.4 the overall development of each student is accommodated in co-curricular activities.

On the other hand, educators should not allow the immediate desires and interests of students to be *the* determining factors in selecting classroom and school experiences. Nor should they allow transitory desires and interests to become long-term determiners of curricular offerings and experiences.

### **Decisions and Studies**

Educators should take into consideration the developmental, interpretative, and value laden nature of forms of inquiry and creativity and personal and cultural understandings when making curricular recommendations and decisions. Consequently, educators should make sure that students learn different perspectives on important events and issues and assure the studies of students:

- 4.1 are pursued in stimulating, engaging, and challenging ways;
- 4.2 are undertaken in intellectually respectable activities;
- 4.3 are approached in a fair, open, and balanced fashion; and
- 4.4 are conducted in an open-minded and reflective manner.

On the other hand, educators should not conclude that every interpretation of a matter is necessarily as warranted or meritorious as another. Nor should they routinely operate on the belief that one's personal point of view is the most defensible one available.

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## **Decisions and Methodology**

When selecting and utilizing methods of teaching, educators should understand that they themselves (the language they utilize, the pedagogy they employ, the interpretations they offer) and their schools (the values they embody, the structures they select, and the cultures they nurture) are also a part of students' curricula. Consequently, educators should protect the individuality of each student and examine critically the curricula that are embedded in personal, classroom, and school activities and ensure that each student:

- 5.1 enjoys the right to think and choose for her- or himself;
- 5.2 is aware of the importance of reasoned and evidentially based opinions;
- 5.3 understands the controversial nature of rational arguments and factual evidence;
- 5.4 accepts the duty to think critically about her or his own opinions and perceptions as well as those of others; and
- 5.5 is conscious of her or his personal responsibility in learning and thinking.

On the other hand, educators should not engage in, facilitate or promote conditioning, indoctrination, or brainwashing. Nor should they attempt to impose personal or group biases, prejudices, ideologies, or beliefs upon students.

## **Decisions and Materials**

Educators should take into consideration the importance of curriculum materials when promoting professional judgment, planning learning activities, seeking to meet the needs of students, cultivating an understanding of subjects and society, addressing diversity interests, and promoting a reflective, just, and caring society. Consequently, educators should ensure curriculum materials are well developed by qualified, diverse, creative, and representative persons and assure:

- 6.1 the creation and selection of materials is seen as an educational and ethical endeavor;
- 6.2 the presentation and representation of topics and peoples in the materials is fair, balanced, and adequate;
- 6.3 the assessment and evaluation of materials is undertaken by evaluators who understand the breath and complexity of their responsibilities; and
- 6.4 the modification and elimination of materials is conceptually, factually, pedagogically, and ethically warranted.

On the other hand, educators should not promote or engage in the censorship

of materials. Nor should they manipulate the creation, selection, and evaluation processes to promote personal preconceptions.

## **Decisions and Evaluation**

Understanding that assessment and evaluation are complex undertakings and have important personal, school, and community implications, educators should take into consideration the well being of everyone when making curriculum and related recommendations and decisions and, specifically, ensure that what matters is what is measured and that it is measured meaningfully and significantly. Consequently, educators should consult with colleagues about the broad dimensions of curriculum assessment and evaluation and should evaluate:

- 7.1 the appropriateness of the particular objectives, specific means, and planned use of assessment data in the overall evaluation process;
- 7.2 the adequacy of assessment means regarding their ability to provide data and information to inform a holistic picture of the curriculum and the student;
- 7.3 the potentiality of the data to facilitate a reflective and sensitive use of information so that the resulting evaluation is designed to improve the curriculum and to enable the student to achieve at higher levels;
- 7.4 the comprehensiveness of the data, its accuracy and soundness in providing defensible interpretations of the quality of the curriculum and the student's progress in her or his studies;
- 7.5 the relevancy of the student's perspective in obtaining a holistic picture of the curriculum and her or his developed abilities and potentialities; and
- 7.6 the understanding of students, parents, and the community in order to communicate clearly the limitations and significance of assessments and evaluations to them.

On the other hand, educators should not misinterpret or misuse data and information or make judgments about a student or a curriculum based upon limited, narrow or inadequate facts, records, and data. Nor should educators conclude that an entire curriculum, much less program, school or district, has been adequately studied and evaluated by merely examining the achievement test results of students.

## **Epilogue**

In the foregoing, we have focused on many of the issues that need to be raised and pursued as educational practitioners debate, develop, and deliver curricula. We have both stated and implied the importance of inclusiveness and diversity of

people and ideas in the curriculum making process. We have implied the need to cultivate school practices, policies, and environments that facilitate ethical decision-making, teaching, and learning. Similarly, we have suggested that there are cautions to be taken in discussing and implementing curricular decisions and in overseeing learning activities in classrooms and schools. Freedom for classroom teachers and students to think and learn together is professionally, personally, and educationally crucial. The integrity of the teaching profession and the identities of students are critical concerns in a democratic ethic of curricular decision-making. Ideally, these suggestions represent a valuable step toward developing a democratic ethic of curricular decision-making. Thinking about these concerns should be helpful in refining our understanding and practice of a democratic approach to making curricular decisions and a democratic philosophy of education.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In writing this kind of document, there is a danger that it may be taken as a final and authoritative statement of fact rather than an initial and dynamic source of thinking about making ethical decisions. Thus, it is important for the authors to state that they think the document is at best a transitory statement that needs to be critically evaluated. In keeping with this thought, the term *toward* is employed to indicate that the document is a step on the road toward refining our thinking about a democratic ethic of curricular decision-making. No doubt, some will think that the document inaccurately articulates certain questions or completely misdirects educators' thinking on other ones. Others will reject the idea of even developing such a document because they think such endeavors are misguided. These and other reactions are welcomed, especially as they enhance a critical excursion into the realm of thinking ethically about curricular decisions.

<sup>2</sup> The conception implied by the word *guide* is that of suggesting important ideas for consideration, not delimiting or defining them or referring to a deontological theory of ethics. As stated in Note 1, the document is designed to help initiate a trip of reflective thinking about ethical decision-making regarding curricular matters. The journey itself is an ongoing experience that each educator makes for her- or himself as she or he interacts with and learns from colleagues, students, and others and studies a variety of ethical questions and theories, such as teleological, deontological, and areteological ones. Ideally, these interactions and studies will lead to warranted thinking and decision-making about curricular matters.

<sup>3</sup> The term *practitioners* is used in the same way that the word *educators* is used in the text. See Note 5 for details. While policy-makers may profit from raising many of the questions that are raised in this work, it is not our purpose to specifically address their thinking and decision-making.

<sup>4</sup> The authors are indebted to the thought of a wide range of curriculum theorists, philosophers, and writers as well as to colleagues and friends who provided critical feedback on earlier drafts. Any ill-conceived ideas in the document, of course, are attributable to the authors. The language employed in this work is designed to avoid much of *the jargon* that is associated with particular curriculum ideologies and philosophies. The authors themselves are from a variety of ethnic, cultural, religious, racial, linguistic, and national backgrounds and differ on a number of theoretical and philosophical issues but agree on a general

democratic philosophy of education. Of course, *the ideas* expressed herein are rooted in a number of curriculum theories. On the other hand, they are not notions that are limited to a particular curriculum philosophy, unless such is a broadly conceived one, e.g., a democratic philosophy of curriculum. As the document suggests, curriculum is broadly understood by the authors. Consequently, we encourage thinking far beyond the boundaries of traditional curriculum theory, design, and delivery and challenge the reader to think about broader aspects of formal and informal teaching and learning activities and experiences.

<sup>5</sup> The term *educator* is employed throughout this document to include any professional educator who is involved in school curricular discussions and decisions, including administrators, teachers, and curriculum theoreticians, planners, designers, creators, developers, writers, assessors, and evaluators.

<sup>6</sup> While determining whether a democratic philosophy of life and education is justified or defensible is an extremely important undertaking, it is beyond the scope of this document. This metaethical issue, as well as many others, needs to be pursued elsewhere.

<sup>7</sup> Of course, these domains—contexts, aims, students, studies, methodology, materials, and evaluation—overlap. They are discussed under separate headings to distinguish particular emphases, not to separate the ideas into discrete realms.

<sup>8</sup> By referring to forms of inquiry and creativity and personal and cultural understandings, we are not necessarily associating ourselves with any curriculum philosophy. Nor are we implying a specific disciplinary, interdisciplinary, non-disciplinary, or anti-disciplinary approach to curriculum development and teaching. These questions, while interesting and worthy of considerable study and debate, are beyond the scope of this work.

## About the Authors

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