Renewing Urban Education: Learning Cycles and the Pedagogy of Possibility

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Abstract

Learning cycles were developed in Brazil as an innovative project in order to address the needs and characteristics of the country's growing heterogeneous urban population. This new school model aims at reducing dropout rates and student failure as well as providing a non-interrupted school experience for diverse learners. In this article, the author describes and analyzes the main elements of learning cycles and compares them to the traditional grade system. The model may not have immediate application in the American educational system, but it does force us to consider urban education from a different and renewed perspective, particularly given socio-economic disparities in society and a growing culturally and linguistically diverse student population.

Keywords: School Models, Learning Cycles, Cycled Schools, Grade Levels

The Grade System

Schools are multi-faceted and complex institutions. As centers of learning, they represent the official knowledge, values and beliefs of a society (Apple, 2000). As microcosms of the larger society,

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they have a determinant role in the socialization process of the youth (Berns, 2009). As children learn how to read and write, they also learn how to function in an organized society.

According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "A school is an administrative unit dedicated to and designed to impart skills and knowledge to students. [It] is organized to efficiently deliver sequential instruction from one or more teachers" (WDPI, 2009). In order to organize the learning process described in this definition, schools have long established a grade system where a specific body of knowledge is assigned to a specific grade level.

Based on the premise that certain skills, cognitive abilities and pieces of information correspond to certain age levels in terms of maturity and readiness, educators and psychologists have categorized and divided learning into grades. The idea of a grade being assigned to a specific age group within a carefully described developmental phase of a child has been so ingrained in the way we define and understand schooling that describing what a first, second or third grader should know has become common knowledge within our school culture.

Learning is progressive and cumulative, but advancement through the grade system is stepwise. While the grade system is useful for simplification and management of education, it has serious consequences for those who do not fit in. Failing and repeating grades, dropping out of school, being left behind and not performing at the expected grade level have become the norm in many schools across the country, particularly in urban areas. School reform focuses mainly on instruction, class sizes, and assessment of students, teachers, and learning outcomes. The effect that the grade-level model may have on students, teachers, and on the practice of teaching and learning, however, is not usually taken into consideration.

Alternative models to the grade system are already in practice. Schools organized around learning cycles, such as the *escolas cicladas* (cycled schools) in Brazil, represent a more engaged commitment to students and demonstrate a distinctive

understanding of how learning is, and should be, part of our lives. In cycled schools, there are no grades and progression is based on learning outcomes demonstrated through students' engagement and performance in realistic projects. In this article, I describe and analyze this educational model developed and implemented in urban schools in Brazil focusing on its structure and the results it has provided so far in establishing a pedagogy of possibility for the renewal of urban public schools.

Learning Cycles

Critics of the grade system point out that schools organized in grades are too tied to the content that needs to be taught and learned at each grade level (Krug & Azevedo, 2000) and that the grade system assumes that learning is a linear process (Krug, 2001). When content becomes the axis of the learning and schooling processes, teachers spend most of their time transmitting information and testing students, and the classroom becomes the sole center of school interaction and dynamics. Moreover, there is neither time nor place for developing students' critical or higher order thinking skills (Gardner, 2004). Knowledge and thinking become separate entities and there is no space for providing students with an integrated view of learning.

The discussion on redefining schooling and schools in Brazil is parallel to the redemocratization of the country, which started in the mid-1980s. While restructuring its educational system, Brazil aimed at creating democratic practices to promote access to education for all students and mechanisms to ensure not only a high quality education for all its citizens, but a way for students of school age to stay in school. Moreover, for a country that was learning democracy, there was a particular concern with developing a curriculum that would speak to the student population it had to educate in terms of their interests, characteristics, needs and socio-economic condition. Students do not stay in school not only because they fail or cannot seem to make adequate progress, but also because they have needs and responsibilities to their families and communities. If schools were

to address those needs as part of their curriculum, there would be a better chance of keeping students in school.

In order to be effective and democratic, a school system needs to be in tune with the student population it serves and, for a developing country like Brazil, this implied creating a new understanding of what schools should be and how they should function. Flexibility was the key element in this discussion. The Brazilian student who needs to work and provide for his/her family needs to be able to attend a school that would adapt to his/her needs, and not the other way around.

Social promotion is not an acceptable solution, as it is only a way to disguise the problem and make social inequalities even more visible. In order to address issues of equity and access in education, a solution needed to take into account student backgrounds and socio-economic disparities in society.

Given its strict organization, the grade system only reinforces social inequalities by excluding students who cannot conform to its structure. It does not accommodate diverse learners, learning styles, and particularly, learners from low socio-economic status. By being selective, the grade system also gets rid of a large number of students which, in turn, affects the larger socio-economic development of the country, as fewer students in school results in an uneducated work force.

In Brazil, the discussion on educational policies led to a transformation in the way schooling is understood. When the Brazilian *Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação* (Guidelines and Bases for Education), was approved in 1996, it allowed for innovations in the curricular structure of what is known in Brazil as "fundamental education" (pre-high school) and flexibility in the implementation of school curricula, schedule, space and utilization (Naiditch, in press). Schools could be organized based on the specific characteristics of the student population they served as long as they guaranteed differentiated instruction and developed concrete objectives for those students.

Learning cycles were initially developed as a way to combat rising dropout rates and to fight against a pattern of failing

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students who were chronically repeating the same grade (Mainardes, 2009). They were also seen as a response to the need for providing students with a non-interrupted schooling experience.

Learning cycles is the name given to the educational system that eliminates learning centered on grades and replaces them with cycles. Cycles differ from grades because they organize learning in longer periods of time as opposed to an academic year and allow students to progress at their own pace based on individual differences, needs, backgrounds, and life circumstances. Schools that implement cycles instead of grades are referred to as cycled schools. The premise of the model is that given the non-linear and asymmetrical nature of learning, schools should be organized based on individual progression. Because students come to school form a variety of backgrounds (socio-economic, cultural ethnic, linguistic, etc.), it is assumed that their learning process and cognitive development will also be varied, i.e., students will progress at different paces and rhythm. The system of learning cycles aims at respecting students' individual differences as well as the way they learn and relate to the material and content, particularly in terms of pace, learning routes and styles. Students will advance through cycles as they demonstrate an understanding and mastery of the contents of each cycle, but their progression is individual, i.e., learners do not advance as a class and the assessment of their progress in based on individual achievement.

Learning cycles have been described in the literature as a model that allows for flexibility, particularly in term of time, assessment, and curriculum (Bernstein, 1996; 2003). Time is not measured as an academic year. Learners may stay in school longer than the usual time that it may take to complete their basic education (pre high-school), but when they graduate, the assumption is that they have developed the necessary skills and knowledge to participate as productive citizens in the socio-economic life of a society. Assessment is also differentiated because it is not measured based on students' performance on standardized tests designed to measure what every learner should know at every grade. Learners' assessment in learning cycles is based on the way they engage and succeed in completing a

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number of projects that require the use of knowledge and skills developed in the classroom. The curriculum is developed connecting content areas to issues that stem from the community so that learners can make meaningful relationships and become more engaged in their learning process. Teachers are also encouraged to use the community as a larger classroom and go beyond the physical space of the school to provide learners with hands-on activities and practical applications of the content they are studying in class.

Proponents of learning cycles believe in teaching and learning as heterogeneous and non-linear processes. Students may or may not be on similar levels in terms of their cognitive skills, knowledge and learning paths (Perrenoud, 2002). Therefore, experimentation with a school model that speaks to various types of learning and learners is encouraged. The model allows for freedom in terms of presenting content differentially, organizing learning materials and school schedule and curriculum (Azevedo, 2007).

Learning cycles were initially developed in order to address the needs and characteristics of a particular student population; students that more often than not need to work and have responsibilities with their families and communities. Moreover, the system also seems to be addressing the needs of communities with lower socio-economic status where interruption in the schooling process is all too common and some learners may need to drop out of school. One of the most important tenets of the system of learning cycles is that schools need to adapt to the types of learners they serve and not the other way around.

The research described in this article was developed in the city of Porto Alegre in southern Brazil. The educational system in Porto Alegre has been widely researched and described in the literature as progressive, innovative and efficient (Fischman & Gandin, 2007; Gandin & Apple, 2002). The municipal department of education has implemented the learning cycles model as a way to improve the education of all its students and produce quality results; a literate and educated population.

Method

This qualitative study was built in collaboration between the researcher and research participants. The researcher has lived in Porto Alegre and has worked in the public school system as a teacher educator for almost five years. The participants of this study were the teachers, students, administrators, parents and community members involved in developing the learning cycle project in one of the school districts in Porto Alegre. Participant observation methodology was used as the data gathering technique. The researcher acted both as an observer and a participant, to varying degrees, in the study. The observation took place in the schools and in the communities surrounding them. The researcher approached participants in their own environment to learn about the model, its implementation and main characteristics. In order to understand the model from a broader perspective, open ended interviews were carried out with volunteer members of the school community.

The discussion developed in this article is based on observation that was done in a school that had implemented learning cycles in a poor community on the outskirts of Porto Alegre. Observation was registered through field notes recording all accounts and observations (Facett, 2009). Semi-structured interviews with a selected number of volunteer participants were also taped and transcribed (Seidman, 2006). Field note and interview data were divided into content units from which categories were later developed. The discussion developed in the next section is a result of two years of visits, interaction, observation and interviews with school and community members.

Even though the researcher interviewed teachers, administrators, parents and students, the focus of this paper is on the model of learning cycles from conception to implementation and the different perspectives were used to inform the research and provide a broad understanding of how the model works. Learning cycles are a result of team work and can only be developed if a group of educators is committed to the project, so, the analysis below is a result of observation, interaction and interviews with

ten teachers who volunteered their time and agreed to give the researcher full access to their classrooms, lessons, activities, assessment tools, and students.

The categories of analysis include how school/schooling is defined, how students are grouped into cycles, how time and space are understood within the model, how the curriculum is conceived and developed, and how teachers' roles differ from those in the traditional grade system. An example of how the model works is also provided to illustrate the principles of learning cycles.

Results and Discussion

Redefining School

Instead of grades, schools offer three learning cycles of three years each which corresponds to the nine years of what is known in Brazil as fundamental education (pre-high school). Students are assessed when they enroll at school and placed in the cycle that corresponds to their current literacy level. They can choose when they will be attending school (morning, afternoon or evening shift), but are strongly encouraged to be in school for as much time as they can afford, preferably for two shifts. The shifts do not need to be consecutive. For example, a student can attend school in the morning and in the evening, and go to work in the afternoon. Flexibility is the key term for learning cycles, as schools need to adapt to the socio-economic reality of its students. In Brazil, many students need to balance between work and study, so schools that allow for a more flexible schedule are more likely to succeed in retaining students.

The model is based on the principle of non-retention, i.e., students within a cycle will not fail if they do not achieve all the learning objectives for that cycle, and a chance will be given to those students who lag behind to be identified and be sent to learning laboratories. These learning laboratories provide additional and more personalized instruction for those who need it. It also extends school time and opposes the traditional view that there is a fixed schedule for students to be at school. Students can come to the learning laboratories at their own convenience. They

attend their cycle on one shift and are encouraged to stay for an additional shift to participate in learning laboratories.

Age and Maturity

In learning cycles, students will ideally be working within their age range. An attempt is made to group students aged 6 to 8, 9 to 11, and 12 to 14 in the first, second and third cycles, respectively. However, that is not always possible, given that there are students who need to stay within a cycle for a longer period of time, and also students who drop out and later decide to come back to school. Therefore, although there may be variation in the age range of students within a cycle, the rationale is that regardless of age, students in the same learning cycle have the same aims and needs. However, there is a separation in the schooling system between adult and child education, which respects learners' maturity, interests, and cognitive ability.

Time and Space

Organizing the learning process and the schooling experience in cycles instead of grades requires a structural change. The academic year is extended and students understand that they will remain working in the same community of learners for three years. This new way of looking at the schooling experience breaks up with that idea of giving students a year to acquire and become competent in a number of skills that they may not necessarily be able to develop in a specific grade during the course of one academic year. In order to get into a new cycle students need to acquire a number of skills, particularly basic language and mathematical literacy, and the understanding is that some students need more time. Teachers are responsible for assessing students' progress and they decide collectively when a learner is ready to move to the next cycle. Learning space is also extended beyond the classroom and the school and teachers are encouraged to explore the community for new learning opportunities wherever they may take place. Learning cycles shift the focus of education from the idea of what one should know at every grade to the real purpose of education, which is learning itself.

In other words, this model aims at preparing students with the knowledge and skills which are necessary to function as active participants in society. Learning is a lifelong process and one needs time to acquire, understand and use the knowledge and skills one gains at school. It also takes time to form and enable citizens to participate in the life of a democratic society.

The Curriculum

Because learning cycles are offered in low-income communities, the schools understand their role in preparing students for citizenship and life in the larger society. In that sense, learning cycles have succeeded in reorganizing schools as public spaces with more democratic pedagogical practices. The curriculum focuses on developing projects around themes that emerge from the communities that they serve and this creates a stronger connection between schools, families and community.

Content is still a major concern, but special effort is made to present content and content areas in an integrated way, without having to separate social studies from language arts, for example. This opposes the traditional fragmentation of knowledge that is supported in the grade system. The premise of learning cycles is that the more integrated the curriculum is, the more meaningful it becomes for students, especially in terms of life applications and skills.

Teachers' Roles

Because of the interdisciplinary nature of the project with the integration of content areas, teachers need to be able to work collaboratively. They also need to create new ways of implementing varied assessment tools and criteria.

In the grade system, many teachers who cannot succeed in either covering all the topics that need to be covered or in having students ready for the next level may not necessarily take the outcomes of the learning process as their responsibility. It becomes an issue for the teacher at the next grade level. In the learning cycles, the teacher becomes more responsible and

accountable for learning outcomes and, given that they will be working with the same group of students for a period of three years, they also get to know their learners more deeply and develop stronger relationships with the families and communities, which will reflect in the way they plan their teaching to support the needs of their students. Teachers also take turns working in the cycles and the learning laboratories.

Cooperative learning is a premise for both students and teachers, particularly because knowledge is built collectively. In an education system organized in cycles, collective knowledge seems to be more valued because it is legitimized by those involved in the process and because both teachers' and students' prior knowledge and experiences are taken into account (Freire, 1992).

Each cycle has one main teacher who will stay with that group of students for the duration of the cycle. There are specific content area teachers that rotate between the different cycles and labs. In order to attend to the principle of more individualized instruction, the educational districts have tried to keep the number of students at around 25 students per cycle, but because no one should have access to school denied, some cycles will have to attend more students at certain times, especially because of the flexible schedules provided. Teachers divide their time between the cycle and the learning laboratories and this helps them observe students attentively as well as recognize and address learning problems as soon as they are identified.

Teachers who work closely with a group of students for a longer period of time are also better able to assess their students' performance and learning without necessarily having to resort to testing. In fact, it is up to the teachers to decide when a learner is ready to move to the next cycle. There are no standardized tests. Teachers use portfolios, class work, writing samples, and their observation in order to assess students.

How the Model Works: An Example

An example of learning cycles and integrated curriculum

comes from a recycling center developed to create jobs for a poor community in Porto Alegre. The recycling center complemented the work developed at the local school. During the research period, I was able to witness how classroom discussions and activities promoted awareness about labor issues and social condition. Learners in all the cycles were involved in the process of developing the center with their families and this motivated and prompted them to read and write about their reality. Students used what they had learned in class to engage in projects in the recycling center and integrated math, language and social studies skills to address the needs of the center. Students' contributions varied based on their knowledge and skill level. This hands-on approach involved both basic and more complex skills, such as identifying, counting and sorting different types of materials, organizing lists, creating spreadsheets, communicating with local agencies and factories, and contacting buyers and donors. Reading, writing and talking about one's own condition and environment empowers learners and motivates them to learn (Freire, 1980). It also creates a stronger connection among schools, families and community.

In the cycles, lessons were responsive to the progress of the students. In the labs, students received more individualized attention and developed activities that focused on their specific needs. In the recycling center, teachers observed students closely, taking notes, and identifying learners' strengths and weaknesses. In the laboratories, learners received additional tutoring in the areas needed by teachers of different content areas who make themselves available to provide individual support for struggling learners.

By focusing on the specific demographic and socioeconomic features of the communities they serve, cycled schools fulfill a meaningful purpose in society and make themselves relevant to the communities they serve. Education becomes indeed the practice of freedom (Freire, 1980), the means by which students will deal with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world in critical and creative ways.

Implications and Conclusion

The grade system has been a long established traditional way of organizing schooling. If students do not achieve what is expected of them at each grade level, however, a problem is generated that may not be addressed until the system finds a way within its own structure to get rid of those students. This does not mean that the system is inherently wrong or solely responsible for student failure. However, it does point to the need of reassessing its purpose and function in society and of rethinking ways of improving it.

Policymakers need to understand that in order to remain functional and serve its purpose in society, schools need to adapt to the different types of learners and communities they serve. Homogeneous classrooms are a myth and learners who do not conform to traditional models should not be punished by the educational system. Instead, schools should develop initiatives in order to accommodate all learners and supplement the learning that occurs in the classroom by extending the school experience and making it more meaningful to students and more relevant to societal needs.

Learning cycles represent an attempt at trying out a different way of organizing formal education, particularly in order to address the needs and specific characteristics of a student population that seems to have been neglected by the official educational system. Learning cycles also represent a more humanistic and differentiated pedagogical approach (Perrenoud, 2000).

Despite having been used in Brazil for a considerable amount of time now, learning cycles have been implemented by a relatively small number of schools – 11.1%, according to the Brazilian Institute of Educational Research (INEP, 2005). However, the interest in learning cycles seems to be growing especially because of their purpose of serving low-income students in mostly poor neighborhoods. In Porto Alegre, the implementation of the model in working class communities has

resulted in larger numbers of school enrollment and student retention (Freitas, 1999).

The model proposed by the learning cycles reminds us that schools should not be *one size fits all*. Schools have the responsibility of serving and respecting all its students and the knowledge they bring with them. Learning cycles may also help us reconsider urban education in general by providing urban student populations with an alternative school model that could be more suitable and appropriate, particularly in areas of culturally, linguistically, and socio-economic diversity. Given the economic needs of urban student populations, schools need to develop pedagogical approaches that offer opportunities for non-traditional students to attend school and pursue a degree. In order to develop a pedagogy of possibility, schools need to redefine themselves and respond to the evolving and changing needs of the society they serve.

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