

**Faculty Curriculum Styles:  
Do Style Preferences Influence the Preparation of Aspiring Teachers?**

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### **Abstract**

This study explored university education faculty perceptions of their curriculum styles and their influence on the preparation of aspiring teachers. Using Miller's (2011) curriculum inventory, a sequential explanatory mixed methods design included ( $N = 11$ ) graduate education faculty who self-identified with one of four schools of curriculum design: linear, holistic, laissez-faire, critical theorist. A follow-up focus group was conducted with  $N = 7$  participants, where their views and theories of curriculum were shared regarding effective design and implementation of curriculum, and the transmission of personal theories to aspiring teachers. Results may be valuable to those who prepare aspiring teachers and develop teacher preparation programs.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to describe and explore university education faculty perceptions of their own curriculum style and the influence their personal styles have on preparing aspiring teachers. Teachers' views and theories of curriculum are important for the effective design and implementation of curriculum. Findings may assist school district leaders, policy makers, and curriculum designers in their quest to design quality curriculum. Subsequent evaluation of the implementation and effectiveness of curriculum may provide educational leaders with information needed to ensure quality of curriculum design.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Since the mid 1980's America's public school system has undergone a number of education reform efforts. At the heart of each of those efforts has been the design of quality curriculum. Ravitch (2010) argues that "we should attend to the quality of curriculum-that is, what is taught. Every school should have a well-conceived coherent, sequential curriculum" (p. 231). It is the quality of curriculum that is at the center of effective school reform initiatives, since the curriculum defines what is important for students to know and be able to do. Some curriculum leaders, like Heidi Hayes Jacobs, argue that "we need to overhaul, update, and inject life into our curriculum and dramatically alter the format of what schools look like to match the times in which we live" (2010, p. 2).

Faculty conceptions of what should be included in the curriculum are impacted by their theory of curriculum. English (2000) points out that the curriculum "defines the work of teachers, at least to the extent of identifying the content to be taught children and

the methods to be used in that process” (p. 2). It is, therefore, important to understand how teachers develop and describe their view of curriculum if the purpose of the school district’s curriculum is to be achieved.

Miller (2011, April) contends that there are four common schools of thought regarding the nature of the curriculum: “the linear, holistic, laissez-faire, and critical theorist approaches” (p. 34). She points out that one’s acceptance of a particular curriculum theory may “subconsciously or explicitly govern our actions” (p. 35). Furthermore, “if we limit ourselves to one way of seeing and one truth, we not only limit our own intellectual development, but we limit our students’ access to learning experiences” (p. 35). Therefore, it is important to understand how university faculty describes their theory of curriculum since they influence the development of aspiring teachers’ views of curriculum.

### **Methodology**

This sequential explanatory mixed methods design sought to describe and explore faculty perceptions of their curriculum styles and in what ways those perceptions influenced the preparation of aspiring teachers. A self-administered inventory instrument was followed by a focus group interview with select participants to develop a holistic understanding of faculty self-identification with curriculum styles and the ways in which those perceptions migrate into teacher preparation programs.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this study were:

- 1) How do teacher preparation faculty self-identify on Miller’s Curriculum Style Inventory (2011)?

- 2) How do teacher preparation faculty describe the development of and influences on their personal theories of curriculum?

### **Participants**

Participants for Phase I of this study consisted of faculty from a small teacher preparation graduate program located in a private university in Southern New England. The program comprises a cohort structure where all students travel through their coursework together.  $N = 13$  faculty were invited to complete the inventory instrument; 11 faculty submitted completed inventories. A follow-up focus group interview was conducted with participants ( $N = 7$ ) who were purposively selected based on their willingness to share their perceptions and experiences.

### **Instrumentation**

**Inventory Questionnaire.** The *Miller Curriculum Style Indicator* (Miller, 2011) was administered to  $N = 13$  faculty, who completed the online inventory in February 2012. This instrument is based on four schools of thought about curriculum orientations and preferences: linear, holistic, laissez-faire, and critical theorist approaches (Miller, 2011) and was designed to provide insights about individual curriculum preferences by asking respondents to self-identify with a particular 'type'. The instrument consisted of 20 questions, each with a forced-choice response option of four possible choices; respondents scored themselves at the completion of the questionnaire and identified their curriculum 'preferences'. These collective preferences were aggregated for a response summary to support the second phase of the research. Permission to use this instrument was granted by the author for the purposes of replicating and extending her research.

**Focus Group Moderator's Guide.** A moderator's guide was developed to facilitate the focus group sessions that followed the initial administration of the inventory questionnaire. Questions were informed by the responses from the inventory and from interviews with teacher preparation administrators from the University's program; the questions were then crafted to probe and extend the inventory curriculum style profiles. Questions used during the focus group queried participants about their perspectives on how curriculum styles are initially developed and how they evolve over time; questions also included a scope on how new teachers should be exposed to curriculum theory. Detailed probes were added to the protocol to elicit personal stories and detailed descriptions of their experiences. The initial findings of the focus group were sent to an elite informant for member-checking in order to correct errors, assess the intention of participant words, and add meaning to the findings that may have been stimulated from reading the interview transcripts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Data Collection**

**Inventory Questionnaire.** The questionnaire was launched in February 2012, through the *Zoomerang* online survey program, following a pilot test of the instrument. Faculty members teaching in a similar teacher preparation program at a local university, who were not included in the final sample ( $N = 3$ ), were invited to participate in the pilot. Since the instrument could not be modified, the changes that resulted from the pilot study only involved modifications to instructions and other logistical details.

Prior to the launch of the inventory, e-mails were sent to all potential participants, informing them of the study and encouraging them to complete the inventory questionnaire that was forthcoming. A week later, an email was sent from the Director of

the Teacher Education program at the sponsoring university, and the message included a direct link to the online questionnaire, with a deadline for response. The link was open for 10 days; in order to boost response rates, a reminder was sent on the fourth day benchmark, including another link to the questionnaire, to strengthen the chances of a robust response (Fink, 2002). Due to the close rapport with the faculty in this program, an optimal response rate was realized ( $R=85\%$ ).

**Focus Group Interviews.** At the conclusion of the questionnaire administration, Phase II of the study sought to further explore faculty perceptions of their curriculum styles through a focus group interview. This strategy intended to develop a detailed and richly descriptive holistic picture of faculty curriculum styles by building on the findings from the inventory. Faculty ( $N = 7$ ) members were invited to participate in the focus group interview at the beginning of fall semester, 2012. The focus group session lasted one hour and was conducted in the university's education program conference room. The researchers audiotaped the session, following the completion of consent forms, and also recorded notes from the session for corroboration with interview transcripts. Consent forms were completed and stored, the tape recording was downloaded to an audio file, and will also be stored for one year and then destroyed. Confidentiality was ensured for all participants.

### **Data Analysis**

**Inventory Questionnaire.** Synthesizing the responses to the 20 questions on each instrument and aggregating the results provided an analysis of teacher curriculum styles; descriptive statistics were used to summarize the results and indicate frequencies and

simple percentages. A ranking list and corresponding quadrant matrix was generated to indicate how respondents self-identified their curriculum styles (Table 1).

**Focus Group Interview.** Focus group data were transcribed using a Classic Approach method of data analysis (Krueger & Casey, 2010). Focus group transcriptions were treated holistically at the completion of the session; transcripts were reviewed once for general impressions and then segmented through a coding process. Coding of the data employed: 1) descriptive coding, 2) interpretative coding, and 3) pattern coding (Miles-Huberman, 1994) in order to ascertain the meaning and interpretations of the participants' experiences. Coded data was subsequently be transformed into themes and categories in order to present the findings, and used participants' words and expressions to illustrate their meaning essence. The participants' experiences were integrated with inventory classification findings to provide a profile of the ways in which faculty curriculum styles influence the ways in which faculty translate their preferences into their teaching styles.

## **Results and Discussion**

A summary of the results follow below, first in summary form to represent the inventory results and then in narrative form to represent the focus group findings.

### **Inventory Questionnaire Findings**

Participants ( $N = 11$ ) self-identified themselves in the following curriculum style categories, conforming to Miller's (2011) classification scheme:



Table 1

*Curriculum Styles of Inventory Respondents (N = 11)*

| Curriculum Style | Holistic | Critical Theorist | Laissez-Faire | Linear |
|------------------|----------|-------------------|---------------|--------|
| Percentage       | 50%      | 22%               | 14%           | 14%    |

The most commonly identified style preference was the Holistic Style (curriculum linked with student interests) at 50%; Critical Theorist (social justice curriculum) was second-ranked (22%), followed by equally ranked Laissez-Faire (no official curriculum) and Linear (structured and controlled curriculum), both at 14%.

These results indicate that the majority of respondents favored the “holistic” view of curriculum. Favoring the “holistic” view of curriculum is somewhat surprising since there is a heavy emphasis today on state driven, highly structured, standard-based curriculum that is tied to mandatory summative standardized tests.

### **Focus Group Findings**

Focus group participant ages ranged from late 20s to early 60s (observation); their years of teaching experience ranged from eight years to 34 years, with the median at 22 years. Faculty had been involved in the University’s teacher preparation program for an average of five years. At least half of the participants had completed the online inventory prior to focus group participation; remaining participants had only reviewed the inventory but had not formally submitted the inventory to the researchers.

Four themes emerged from the data results. These themes represent participants' perceptions of initial and significant influences on their curriculum styles, the context for how their curriculum styles are developed and implemented, the influence of the standards movement and other compliance issues on their curriculum styles, and, finally, their perceptions of how their personal curriculum styles have evolved and continue to develop.

**Theme #1: Influences on Curriculum Style Development**  
**“Masterful teachers made a difference...”**

Participants noted that the most significant influence on initial curriculum theory development was a mentor, master teacher or department chair. For most new teachers, having an individual who was willing to help or guide them was essential to helping them refine their personal belief system about teaching. While most participants cited textbooks or teacher preparation manuals as the initial or most common ‘first’ influence, it was ultimately the relationship with another teacher or supervisor that made a substantive difference. One comment focused on a first teaching experience: “I worked for this department head, and he made a huge impact on me; he stressed a collegial environment and we all worked together to craft a curriculum. That collaboration caused me to see how my beliefs, to date, compared with fellow teachers and I began to modify my style”. Additionally, other participants noted that working with fellow teachers was a constant influence on developing their personal theories, and that while using the textbook was the first means of thinking about how you wanted to teach, the influence and discourse with other professionals was more powerful. As one teacher suggested, “We were encouraged to work with each other, talk to each other, and use the elements of

applied learning, taking all the influences and deciding for yourself what worked and what didn't ...”.

**Theme #2: Curriculum Styles and Context**  
**“I’m a walking contradiction!...”**

There was candid discussion regarding the influence of school culture, district and state education requirements, as well as the standards movement, as major influences on one’s curriculum style and preference. As one participant stressed, “I have to meet learners where they are, I have to meet the standards, I have to achieve good evaluation scores, I have to meet state requirements, and I have to do what feels right to me, personally... I’m a walking contradiction when it comes to my personal theories!”. Participants were quick to note that where you teach, who you teach, what you teach, and class size and district requirements all made a significant difference in how you applied your teaching and curriculum theory: “We have to spend lots and lots of time on student progress reports, for good scores on our evaluations, but this is the exact opposite of where we should be spending our time”. Another participant agreed, saying that “...in my experience, the state puts out dictates which sometimes go against ‘best practices’ or personal beliefs”. Many participants suggested that while the standards requirements had their benefits, they also posed challenges: “I am not against the new standards requirements and I can see their value, but it seems all these requirements greatly impact my curriculum style”. A university faculty member in the teacher preparation program offered her perspective: “I often complain that my lowest priority appears to be teaching ... with all the demands, the assessments and outcomes we must design and report, there is not much time left for *teaching* in the classroom”!

An additional influence, and one that was acknowledged to be powerful, was the influence of the school culture on personal theories. As one participant emphasized, “the culture of a school is very strong and strongly influences who you are and who you become as a teacher”. Another participant followed with a comment of a similar sentiment: “Once you get into the classroom, the mix of standards and state requirements and school culture exert such a powerful influence that it might even overcome what you learned in your teacher prep program”. The deeply held beliefs of a school culture are clearly viewed as one of the major important influences on an individual’s personal curriculum theory development.

**Theme #3: Preparing Aspiring Teachers**

**“Anything we can give our students to develop their own personal theories is essential...”**

Participants reflected on the ways in which teacher preparation programs could better introduce theories of curriculum at the onset of their programs in order to help new students decide which style suited them best. Many participants agreed that new teachers should be exposed to as many different theories as possible, ensuring that they “...could find their own place on the continuum of curriculum theory”. One individual commented that every student absorbs information about curriculum theory through their own perspective; others concurred by saying, “we need students to realize that curriculum philosophies are effective only if you keep an open mind about the varieties of theories and how they work in an actual classroom, which means it is important to be good consumers of information, and good practitioners afterwards...”.

**Theme #4: Continuing Development and Reflection**

**“The best teachers let their curriculum theory evolve to match their students, their situation, and their personal potential...”**

Participants spoke extensively about the ongoing development of their personal theories and the ways in which one's theory can change over time. As one participant reflected, "it just takes time to develop a true philosophy, one that works and is truly effective"! Other participants emphasized that all teachers may begin at a common starting point, having completed teacher training programs, but the integration of teaching and working with colleagues and understanding how to reach different learners creates a process of building a personal belief system as a teacher. As one individual said, "...no matter what is going on around me, or what the standards require me to do in the classroom, I know that my own personal style creeps into how and what I am teaching all the time... and it continues to change as I do."

### **Conclusions**

The quality of the curriculum is an important element of current approaches to educational reform. Teachers' conceptions of curriculum influence both the design and implementation of the curriculum. University faculty's theory of curriculum may have an impact on how aspiring teachers develop their theory of curriculum.

These results indicate that despite the influence of state and district requirements and new standards requirements, which absorb a teacher's time, at least 50% of the respondents self-identified with the 'holistic' curriculum model. Based on focus group remarks, it would appear that these teachers strive to remain true to their personal beliefs and to the needs of their students, in spite of the many challenges and demands they must respond to in their teaching environments. Additionally, participants noted the significance of a mentor or colleague to further their personal theories and practices; the

collaboration with fellow teachers furthered this process and enhanced personal growth and exploration.

Teacher preparation faculty feel strongly that they should expose aspiring teachers to as many different curriculum theories as possible as part of the process of developing effective and thoughtful educators. Their own personal theories of teaching continue to evolve over time, integrating many influences and elements; a veteran teacher noted “...in the end, it is about helping aspiring teachers think about the potential of human beings by beginning the process of thinking about how we teach, who we are as individuals, and what we bring to the classroom.”

### **Educational Implications**

Findings from this may assist school district leaders, policy makers, and curriculum designers in their quest to design quality curriculum. The results may also be of value to university faculty who have responsibility for preparing the next generation of teachers.

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