

PART IV

EDUCATION

1. CHALLENGES TO UNDERSTANDING CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT: LESSONS FROM A PEDAGOGY CLASS WITH ARTS PRE-SERVICE STUDENT-TEACHERS

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Abstract: *The intent to structure valuable learning experiences, focusing on student-teachers' exercise of pedagogical creativity and informed critical reasoning, may prove particularly challenging in the current national curriculum for pre-service teacher education. It is proposed here a reflective view of the challenges to arts pre-service student-teachers understandings of concepts and processes related to curriculum development; findings of previous empirical exploratory research questioning student-teachers conceptions of learning, and identity issues related to induction practices drawing heavily on apprenticeship models of learning feed into the proposed analysis. It is concluded on possible conceptual and methodological shifts towards understanding learning in teacher education.*

Key words: *challenges, learning, teacher education, curriculum development*

1. Research approaches to understanding learning in teacher education programs

A lot of attention has been directed towards improving the quality of student learning which led to a concentrated concern with understanding professional development of teachers as one important way of achieving the goal of better quality education for all. Despite the importance attributed to the issue, there is plenty evidence claiming ineffectiveness of teacher professional learning activities (Hanushek, 2005). Borko (2004), D. Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002), and Timperley and Alton-Lee (2008) have all argued that the problem stems, in part, from researchers employing simplistic conceptualizations of teacher professional learning that fail to consider how learning is embedded in professional lives and working conditions (apud. Opfer and Pedder, 2011) Only recently literature has started to build on the work of researchers who have shown teaching and learning to be contextually situated (e.g., Anderson, Greeno, Reder, & Simon, 2000; Borko & Putnam, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Opfer and Pedder (2011) argue that continuing to focus on specific activities, processes, or programs in isolation from the complex teaching and learning environments in which teachers live will only prevent from deeply understanding how teachers learn effectively. By taking empirical relationships between forms of activity or task (e.g., being activity based), structures for learning (e.g., collaboration between teachers), location (e.g., situated in

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practice), and so on, and some measure of teacher change to *be* teacher learning, the enterprise of understanding teachers' learning is committing to an epistemological fallacy (Opfer, Pedder, 2011).

This type of process-product framing of learning is closely followed up by another general tendency towards absence versus presence measurement of variables, leading to a difficulty in understanding the way in which the various features and characteristics of learning, aggregated through correlation studies, work in different intensities and at different scales in different contexts (Opfer, Pedder, 201). Shifting the conceptual framing of teacher learning research from a cause-and-effect approach to a focus on causal explanation so that we understand what conditions, why and how teachers learn, seems to be the reasonable way ahead. And, for this type of understanding to occur, it is only reasonable to re-conceptualize teacher learning as a complex system rather than as an event (Collins and Clarke, 2008; Davis and Sumara, 2006), which will assume that there are various dynamics at work, interacting and combining in different ways which make multiple causal pathways plausible for one and the same event.

2. Understanding curriculum development: the many possible breakages

“Lecturer: So, in teaching Arts to eight graders. Let’s talk about expectations related to that. What would you be expecting of that? What would your students be expecting? What would others - parents, teachers, curriculum planners etc. – be expecting of it ?

Student 1: We have a curriculum plan. I’m supposed to go by the planning. Those with talent will go further anyhow and I will focus a bit more on those. I’m not gonna go like you’re all suppose to go to competitions and all that....

Student 2: In Arts it is a bit more relaxing. There is no pressure like in Math or Romanian.

Student 3: We’re supposed to let them be. It is not like at the Arts school. That is different. I mean Arts is what they’re there for and what I am doing with them is more seriously looked at.”

This excerpt is introducing a small fragment from a discussion I engaged in with my Arts student-teachers taking an introductory course and seminar in Pedagogy and Curriculum during their first year at the university, as part of the national curriculum for pre-service teacher education. The political discourse on education reform in the country is stressing the importance of preparing all teachers for relevant participation in the reform processes, as capable decision makers in all aspects of curriculum, and scrupulous observers of their students’ learning needs, interests and performances, proving able to attune these with the opportunities for learning afforded in the school. In short, teachers are expected to competently act as curriculum developers, designing the best possible learning for their students in and out of the classroom.

As the fragment of dialogue announces, this political desiderate may not be the easiest to accomplish during those first university-based steps into pre-service teacher education. A systemic approach to analyzing students’ language affords understanding how student-teachers read the system of activity the

mainstream curriculum is presenting them with, a reading mode which is expected to shape and guide their participation in it: what are the conceptual and/or material instruments mediating learning actions in the classroom? (i.e. the reference to a curriculum plan in Student 1's entry); what rules apply to those actions? (i.e. the reference to a relaxing, no pressure climate in Arts, in Student 2's entry); what roles/ specific ways of dividing labor can be delineated? (i.e. the reference to envisioned specific manner of working with the talented in Student 1's entry, or of working with students majoring in Arts in Student 3's entry). This systemic approach to understanding student teachers' way of signifying curriculum and responsible actions with it cautions inquiry over what might this language's historical and cultural grounds be, and how to work with it towards realization of teacher education's desiderates to prepare teachers who are actively and relevantly engaging with curriculum development. This prompts a discussion aligning to the many stances in the pedagogical literature exposing behaviorist stances on learning and teaching, and drawing attention on the many limits of delivery approaches to curriculum, and of too much control exercised over classroom teaching and learning through thoroughly prescribed curricula, standardization of educational outcomes, and hierarchical structuring of learning contents in the school curriculum, reflecting prioritization of the school subjects included in the national and international examinations (i.e. Baccalaureate, PISA, TIMSS etc).

The context of teaching, when the dialogue with my arts students exemplified in the excerpt emerged, was that of discussing the theoretical dimensions of education and finding possible arguments in support of aesthetic education's presence in the mainstream core curriculum through eighth grade. I have proposed to my students to reflect on a graphical model advancing a 21st century education's representation, figuratively situated at the intersection of three circles named: Knowledge (what we know), Skills (how we use and apply what we know) and Character (how we engage with the world). In the graphical model the three intersecting circles, representing three domains of educational intent, were all integrated in a larger circle named Meta-cognition (thinking about our learning). I proposed to my students to explain to me what they thought of this model and try to use it in arguing how it works in relation to aesthetic education.

“Student 4: Well knowledge is what we know, for instance what is a tone or a semitone. Then skills refer to knowing to read from a musical sheet a tone and a semitone, or to write the music using tones and semitones correctly....I don't know what character has to do with music education ...

Student 5: Aesthetic is about art and arts are about sensibility and emotions. They are about moving people, emotionally touching them until something happens...catharsis ”

Apart from displaying a rather simplistic manner of conceptualizing aesthetics, mainly reducible to artistic forms and related primarily to the affective spectrum of psychological processes it elicits in any form of participation to arts (consumption or production), the students' difficulties in

making sense of the proposed model of conceptualizing education (here mainly referring to aesthetic education) have a predictive value for more than their particular situation with a specific pedagogical problem. It invites inquiries into the historical and cultural grounds of the meanings the students are constructing in relation to the pedagogical model proposed. The current national mainstream curriculum, in place for over a decade, exhibits a particular manner of structuring the school time schedule, distributing uneven time resources between disciplines of study structured in seven curricular areas, with arts (including two subjects, namely Music and Visual Arts) as one of them. Albeit present among the seven curricular areas, the arts are the only part of the curriculum where the classroom learning time is reduced by half in the eighth grade. Meanwhile all the other curricular areas maintain their classroom time allocations, except for social sciences which receive an extra hour per week in the eighth grade.

This particular way of allocating classroom time legitimizes speaking of a collectively held view of what the educational priorities are, as they are reflected in the hierarchical distribution of disciplinary learning contents. There is a noticeable continuity between the top-level decision makers' instantiations in the national curriculum with all its implied hierarchies and priorities, delineating boundaries and statutes of limitation among learning contents and the student-teachers' difficulties in conceptualizing arts and aesthetic education (i.e. limited to either an emotion eliciting, sort of functionalist view, in Student 5's language, or to an intellectualist stance on what type of academic knowledge and skills legitimize music education's presence in the school curriculum, in Student 4's language). This continuity serves as an argument in support of the thought that these fractioned conceptions of learning and education, placing arts in either an elitist (reserved to a selected talented few) or functionalist instantiation (arts serve purposes limited to either emotional or intellectual academic gain), stems out of a collectively held type of educational mannerism, imbuing actions and conceptions of learning and teaching at all levels of educational practice, from curriculum decision-makers to the teachers and the learners in the classrooms, and the graduates of the mainstream education enrolling in teacher education programs at the university. The fact that those voicing requirements for teachers to be prepared to act as reflective practitioners drawing on their meta-cognitive competence and work as capable curriculum developers are actually the same decision makers advocating the current national mainstream curriculum is paradoxical enough to invite inquiries over how honest these contradictory intentions are.

3. Some concluding remarks on understanding learning in teacher education

For the most part, Romanian educational research pays tribute to a manner of conceptualizing teacher learning through serial (Doll, 1993), additive (Day, 1999) lens. Teacher professional development consists of a repertoire of activities and methods for learning and that teacher learning follows more or less directly from the frequency with which programs intending to foster teachers' professional development use these specific activities, structures and so on

(Opfer, Pedder, 2011). As data in the small analysis presented here indicates, such a conceptual and instrumental frame of work is neither fostering understanding of possible breakages in the expected process-effect approach to learning, nor is it helpful in finding ways to overcome these breakages. As arts students enter programs of teacher education, what lies in front of them in terms of activities and methods of learning is not simply and uncritically pursued. Student teachers read the terrain of their learning trajectories through the program of teacher education through a variety of lenses: previous learning experiences, expectations attached to participating in the current educational program, motivations, conceptions of learning, professional projections, habitual frames of mind in reading the context of Romanian formal education proposals etc. Understanding and acknowledging them as fluid, expanding components in dynamic relations with all other reading modes and registers proposed in the system of the learning activity is the only way forward in foreseeing, making sense of and responding to possible breakages in the learning process. Restraining to simply focusing on aligning the resources, procedures and conceptions available in reference to a desired approach to the teacher education program is very likely to not afford any of the intended learning, that is, the learning that positions the teacher-student as the curriculum decision-maker to be.

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