DECISIONS TEACHERS MAKE

Considering curriculum implementation as a matter of decisions teachers make, Leithwood and MacDonald studied the "reasons teachers give for their curriculum decisions and relate such reasons to a plausible pattern of teacher needs."[1] Their "primary interest" – expressed in the question: "What basic needs do teachers attempt to fulfill through their classroom curriculum work?" – was supplemented by others: "How do teachers go about trying to fulfil these needs?" and "What aspects of their professional environment do they perceive to be most helpful in meeting these needs?"[2] Answers to these questions would "help explain patterns of teacher-initiated classroom activity," converting "curriculum choices" from answers to the question "what knowledge is of most worth?"[3] but as "attempts to fulfil teachers' basic needs in their work setting."[4] Apparently adopting the self-interested rational agent assumption of once mainstream economics – see research brief #69 – Leithwood and MacDonald cast "some choices" as being "more instrumental than others in meeting these needs," but they imagine that all "teachers will attempt to optimize the fulfilment of professionally linked needs in part through curriculum decision-making."[5] Such "knowledge of needs teachers strive to fulfil through such decision-making" is not important because it helps us understand curriculum in its enactment – as "lived"[6] – but because such knowledge "should be especially useful in attempting to assist teachers in implementing classroom curriculum innovations," as "innovations perceived by teachers as helpful in fulfilling classroom linked needs are likely to be the subject of more implementation effort than those not so perceived."[7]

Leithwood and MacDonald found that "teachers' reasons for curriculum choices more frequently indicated needs for affiliation with students than any other single category of need," as over 90% of respondents cited this reason.[8] Affiliation appears to be about "maintaining student interest" even more than "obtaining student understanding."[9] Leithwood and MacDonald report that as "many teachers use student interest and the quality of student responses to evaluate their methods and content selection" – certainly I never did as a high-school teacher[10] – and so "it is not surprising to find these as the criteria for selection in planning and implementing those features of their curricula."[11] They continue: "Because teachers are confronted with partially unpredictable and shifting expressions of student interest and understanding, the need for flexibility in choosing what to teach and when to teach it" requires "flexibility" and a "relative independence": without these "teachers could not act on the basis of the immediate feedback from students considered critical to the continued maintenance of a successful, co-operative classroom environment."[12] The picture they present is one of the teachers as anxiously reactive, ever-concerned students aren't wedded to whatever is going on: "Almost at once, preplanned activities are assessed, replanned, implemented, and re-evaluated during the course of a lesson."[13] Maintaining student

interest presses teachers into having "different goals for different students," but Leithwood and Macdonald attribute this "fact" not to ever-shifting student interest but instead to "the wide variation in ability of students," although they list only two types: (1) "preparing relatively able students for future schooling," while (2) providing "less able students … with basic skills to survive happily in the community, or even more modestly, to engage in some fundamental socialization."[14] So much for student potential or teachers' professional obligation to everyone realize it.

Apparently that obligation does not inform teachers' "strong need to feel professionally useful," as it is "expressions of student interest and learning gleaned through close affiliation with students [that] provide the data for judging one's usefulness."[15] Again Leithwood and Macdonald list "classroom independence, freedom, and flexibility" not as markers of academic – intellectual –freedom but "as instruments for maximizing the possibility of receiving favorable student responses," thereby "maximizing one's feeling of usefulness."[16] How being liked comports with what Leithwood and Macdonald announce as teachers' "fundamental professional goal … student progress"[17] is not clear, unless the latter is thought to depend upon the former. Actually, the two appear antagonistic or at least unrelated when Leithwood and Macdonald conclude teachers' responses "tend to suggest that, while student interest is an important short-term criterion of success, in the long run, cognitive competence is what really counts."[18] Even for that second type of student who qualifies for "socialization" only?

Leithwood and MacDonald turn next to teachers' indication of "security-related needs for firm organizational policies," a phrase that today (in the United States at least) conjures up the threat of mass school shootings, but in Canada in 1981 references instead "needs" for "both curriculum guidelines and formal tests and grading policies," needs, Leithwood and Macdonald admit, that "would seem to conflict with needs for independence, freedom, and flexibility" but (as it turns out) such "guidelines" and "policies"

> (a) saves them time in the preparation of materials, (b) takes the worry out of the sequencing of topics, and (c) provides reliable and trustworthy tests. However, they reserve the right to deviate from the content if it seems to be in conflict with what they perceive are the students' needs and abilities. As long as the teachers are able to carry on teaching from a guideline with evidence signifying student achievement and interest, they are happy to have it and appear likely to use it extensively. Teachers see the guideline as allowing them the time they require to exercise the independence, freedom, and flexibility needed elsewhere in their teaching.[19]

That "elsewhere" would seem to be finding "favourable student responses" and ensuring students' "cognitive competence." What knowledge is of most worth – the

curriculum question – would appear to be irrelevant. And that allusion to "security" turns out to be the function of "organizational policies (in this case tests and grading policies) as protective devices against outside interference from parents and superiors."[20]

Leithwood and MacDonald found that a third of the teachers they surveyed indicated that their "affiliation needs [were] fulfilled through rather extensive peer interaction during the course of making curriculum planning decisions," affiliation not in service to, say, solidarity but to "minimizing workload, increasing the array of curricular alternatives from which to choose, increasing the similarity of curricular offerings across classes, and obtaining additional evidence of one's effectiveness."[21] Leithwood and MacDonald conclude that "implementing classroom curriculum innovations would seem to centre on providing convincing evidence of student interest and learning," as "teachers will be readily attracted to changes they perceive likely to enhance student interest and learning."[22]

COMMENTARY

Anton Birioukov-Brant served as the research assistant on this article; his commentary mirrors my own. First, he notes that their "findings … appear to be common sense, in that teachers primarily base their curricular choices on student interests and their potential to improve students' learning." I'd add only that there seemed a narcissistic dynamic in play too, at least in Leithwood and Macdonald's assertion that teachers deployed their "independence, flexibility" to obtain "favourable responses" from students, a vague phrase that could include student interest but does not seem to coincide with it. Anton also noted that "content itself is not quite as important as the skills the students are to be learning." Recall I suggested it didn't seem to matter at all. Anton also noted that there is no attention to the "moral" dimension of teaching. Indeed.

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ENDNOTES

[1] 1981, 103.

[2] 1981, 103-104.

[3] The canonical curriculum question was asked – and answered – most famously by Herbert Spencer (1884, 79-80): "Thus to the question with which set out – What knowledge is of most worth? – the uniform reply is – Science. This is the verdict on all the counts. For direct self-preservation, or the maintenance of life and health, the all-important knowledge is – Science. For that indirect self-preservation which we call gaining a livelihood, the knowledge of greatest value is – Science. For the due discharge of parental functions, the proper guidance is to be found only in – Science. For that interpretation of national life past and present, without which the citizen cannot rightly regulate his conduct, the indispensable key is – Science. Alike for the most perfect production and highest enjoyment of art in all its forms, the needful preparation is still – Science. And for purposes of discipline – intellectual, moral, religious – the most efficient study is, once more – Science."

[4] 1981, 104. Never mind the "sticky wicket" status of the concept of "needs," reducing "curriculum choices" to them seems rather narcissistic, no?

[5] 1981, 104.

[6] Aoki 2005 (1986), 160.

[7] 1981, 104. Even when teachers don't request or want assistance? In such instances, "such knowledge" of "needs" could be used to surveil and manipulate. Forty years ago, this administrative interest was summarized as "practical."

[8] 1981, 109.

[9] 1981, 109. I wonder why the concept of "affiliation" was chosen and not "engagement," as the former risks positioning teachers as trying to placate students, even at the cost of understanding. Engagement implies commitment but leaves open the mode of pedagogical relation, which could even be conflict-laden, as teachers might challenge students who, for instance, deny climate change. Of course, "student interest" is important – some would say even a prerequisite to understanding – but when made all-important it risks demoting teachers to entertainers.

[10] Pinar 2015, 3. Certainly I was attentive to their interests but within the curriculum choices I made.

[11] 1981, 110. I wonder if students thought their teachers worked from their "interests." Certainly, student interest can start reflection on content, but answering the curriculum question – what knowledge is of most worth? – requires expertise K-12 students by definition do not possess.

[12] 1981, 110-111. While I cannot dispute the data Leithwood and Macdonald present, I resist the implication that teachers *should* be responsive to day-to-day "feedback" that students provide. Such "short-termism" risks oversimplification of complex concepts and the substitution of immediate gratification for the not-always pleasant labour understanding can require.

[13] 1981, 111.

[14] 1981, 111.

[15] 1981, 112.

[16] 1981, 112.

[17] 1981, 112.

[18] 1981, 112.

[19] 1981, 112-113.

[20] 1981, 113.

[21] 1981, 114.

[22] 1981, 115.