Innovation in Times of Crisis: Using the COVID-19 Pandemic to Reevaluate Curricula

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Introduction

On March 13, 2020, I sat amongst my colleagues, awaiting the fate of the school year. As the dismissal bell rang, teachers were informed that classes would move online for the foreseeable future. As the COVID-19 pandemic progressed, districts and administrators worked to set teachers and students up with online platforms so that learning could persist. The more tumultuous the world seemed; the more teachers were instructed to push forward with lessons under the pretense that this was a constant students were craving.

The movement forward did not provide the comfort that it promised. It was an additional source of frustration for many families as they had to navigate unfamiliar technology, curriculum, assessments, and their personal lives. Dissatisfaction was not unique to families; urban educators committed to combating inequities saw how adapting curriculum and assessments online perpetuated educational disparities. In other words, the attempt to keep instruction consistent as the world was collapsing around teachers and students did not accomplish its goal; instead, it shed light on the ever-growing inequalities impacting American schools.

Understanding the issues that plague education (e.g., achievement gaps, lack of learning materials, and access to learning) and the pandemic's role in exacerbating them, it is important to seize the opportunity to correct the inequities that have long afflicted educational institutions. Analyzing my experience teaching throughout the pandemic and research on standards-based curriculum, I will argue that schools must adapt curriculum and allow space for culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) so that students and teachers can interact with materials reflective of their classroom and society.

Curriculum

American schools serve linguistically, culturally, and racially varied student bodies (Gay, 2018; Kohli, 2021; National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). In my classroom alone, I educate students from seven countries, speaking three different languages and bringing unique cultural norms to our space. However, my school's curricula in New Jersey does not reflect the level of diversity that we experience within our school community.

Textbooks and lessons are often focused on the dominant culture. There is a heavy emphasis on white, Eurocentric culture, which ignores other cultures and ideals (Leonardo & Grubb, 2019). Eurocentric culture refers to the focus on westernized belief systems and societal patterns with a disregard for outside cultural norms and principles. Leonardo and Grubb (2019) explained the issue with a single framed curriculum noting that "...students who do not see themselves in the curriculum will not have an organic connection with schooling" (p. 19). This means that the materials are more difficult to access and comprehend as they are written in a way that can only be easily understood

by one group of students: white, middle/upper-class children. Furthermore, it can cause a disconnect between groups of students and education. Students who do not come from Eurocentric backgrounds may feel detached from the curriculum, peers, and school altogether.

Coupling the myriad of curricular restraints with the pandemic, education became more difficult to access, literally and figuratively. Students faced different hardships and had varying responsibilities during the pandemic, which impacted their access to learning materials (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Additionally, some schools began virtual instruction immediately, while others, like my own, used paper packets to enhance student learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). As schools adapted their curricula to an online format, there was minimal thought about how maintaining an already white-focused curriculum online would add a layer of difficulty for linguistically and culturally diverse students.

Instead of taking advantage of unprecedented times and altering lessons to be responsive to students' cultures and needs, at my school, teachers had to continue with the same standards-based lessons. Doing this advanced the narrative of curriculum creation being dominated by white people (Brown & Au, 2014). Further, teachers were required to test students' knowledge and understanding from these lessons. Forcing assessments upon students and teachers who were struggling to adapt caused unnecessary stress. Students need a curriculum that they can access and understand to develop positive connections with school and learning.

We Know the Problem, What Comes Next?

The pandemic allowed for something that had rarely been done before. It gave families insight into the information and conversations children take part in daily. It allowed parents[1] to participate in their child's education actively. Before March 2020, few schools included parents in learning spaces (Alexander, 2016). Even schools with "open-door policies," like my own, seldom advertised this option. Instead, the school system has seemed very "us" versus "them"- school versus families.

Families have already been privy to what occurs during their child's school day because of virtual learning. This affords us a unique opportunity, albeit the circumstances are not ideal. Schools, which generally rely on teachers' knowledge base, who have been trained in the execution of dominant curricula (Elemore, 1996), can expand their educational understandings. Instead of continuing the current cycle of knowledge production, we can use the new formats for learning and adapt the curriculum. Rather than turning away parents' commentary and ideas, we now have a platform to listen and innovate.

The Need for Collaborative Changes

Families and schools must work together to critique and adjust current curriculum practices. However, school personnel must make the first approach for a community's cultures to be input into school curricula. Keeping in mind parents' busy schedules, we should attempt to meet them on their terms and in time frames that might be outside a school's hours of operation. Further, instead of meeting within the confines of a building, we can utilize online tools to video conference. Over the past two years, most people have become accustomed to personal interactions through video chatting and electronic formats, so we can continue online contact instead of rushing back into "normal" communication patterns.

There are numerous benefits to using online platforms. First, families who cannot attend traditional meetings because of work and life duties can now be part of the conversation. Likewise, teachers and administrators who would like to be involved in the process can attend from their own homes. This takes away the stress of staying late at work and allows educators to see to their personal needs before and after the meeting. Lastly, using video tools allows everyone to have a "home-field advantage." Often, when parents come to school, they may feel ostracized or defensive as they are in a space that is not comfortable to them. Allowing families, and school personnel, to speak freely from their homes provides a certain sense of relief that school buildings cannot. Through this, more families can express their genuine feelings and critiques of curricula to create a better one.

Once the initial meeting time is set, it is essential to have parameters and clear goals. Parents will be made aware of what subject or learning material is being critiqued and adjusted, while teachers must enter the meeting with an amenable and reflective mindset. This is not to silence anyone but to get the group focused on what is at hand-developing a meaningful, culturally responsive curriculum.

As educators, we generally take feedback critically rather than constructively. We give maximum effort in everything we do, so it can be challenging to listen to criticism; however, teachers must come with open minds to appropriately alter lessons to meet the cultures within their community. Lastly, meetings should allow administrators to present data about student learning[2] in an accessible way so that teachers and families can objectively assess the curriculum.

After hosting sessions with parents, the district heads of curriculum should enlist the help of teachers to improve the scope and sequences for each subject and grade level. By processing recommendations from parents, teams of teachers and the department leaders should adapt the materials and information presented where feasible and find spaces where culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) fits in Ladson-Billings (1995). CRP is an approach to teaching that empowers students to critically analyze, and review materials presented to them; it allows students to understand the lens in which materials were developed and which voices were systematically excluded. Therefore, CRP can be used as a tool while adjusting the curricula, teams should be finding areas where students can question the assumptions of the curriculum and think critically about the beliefs presented so that additional perspectives can be introduced into the curricula. Moreover, the scopes should allow teachers time for powerful conversations about information taught to make further adjustments and develop critical thinking skills.

Conclusion
The pandemic has provided opportunities for change and growth. Using curriculums that focus on the dominant culture have a long history of under-serving culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse student bodies. Instead of holding on to the past, it is vital that communities and schools collaborate to adjust the curriculum promptly. COVID-19 has allowed educators to alter their approach to teaching, so we must cease the chance to make meaningful changes to the curriculum. Through open, honest, and productive dialogue, curricula can begin to reflect the student bodies we interact with daily and allow genuine learning and critical thinking to occur.

Notes
[1] Understanding children are raised in varying family structures (parents, grandparents, aunts/uncles, etc.) the term "parents" is used to denote anyone raising a child.
[2] Learning refers to knowledge gained throughout the year independent of standards.

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