

The Professional Teacher's Dilemma: Balancing Autonomy and Obligation

Teachers weigh curriculum decisions on a delicate balance: personal values on one side, responsibilities to students and school on the other.

What is the proper mix of teacher autonomy and obligation to the organization in teaching? One theory argues that fidelity to prescribed policy represents the truest form of professionalism. Another maintains that teachers' first and foremost professional obligation is to their students.

In classrooms, controversy between autonomy and obligation revolves around individual teachers' translations of prescribed curricular policy into the operational curriculum of the classroom. Whether in the form of formal guidelines, topical lists, or mandated textbooks, curriculum policy presents classroom teachers with materials that have inherent "curriculum potential" (Ben-Peretz 1975). Teachers exploit this potential by selecting specific content, texts, materials, methods, activities, and evaluative tools. Their selections along these five dimensions constitute individual interpretations of curricular policy.

A number of obligations mediate the translation of curriculum potential to what happens in classrooms—obligations to the teaching profession, to the organization within which teachers work, and to the clients (both students and parents) they serve. These multiple obligations provide the key to teacher choice (Shulman 1983). Faced with competing and, at times, conflicting obligations upon their instructional programs, teachers pick and choose, depending upon circumstances. Teachers' response, not always conscious, translates policy into practice and integrates into the classroom curriculum their obligations to profession, organization, and client.

Translating Policy into Practice

I recently explored one middle school teacher's translation of curricular poli-

cy into practice. I identified sources of influence over classroom curriculum, described the relative strength of their influence and the degree to which this influence is subject-specific, and generated hypotheses regarding the tensions between autonomy and obligation. My primary informant, a 7th grade social studies and English teacher by the pseudonym of Deborah Rosen, teaches in the same predominately upper middle class professional community she began teaching in 17 years ago. Still one of the youngsters on the faculty, Deborah holds a B.A. and M.A. in history and a M.A. in educational administration, not unusual credentials in a district where "even kindergarten teachers are expected to have a Ph.D. thesis on the way," in the words of Deborah's principal.

At the time of my study, Deborah's part-time teaching assignment included a lower-track social studies class, an honors social studies class, and an honors English class. I shadowed Deborah for two weeks, passively participating in her school day and supplementing extensive classroom observation with daily interviewing and document analysis. A series of retrospective interviews and stimulated recall exercises based on classroom observations aided in identifying and describing the relative influence of the various factors affecting her curricular choices. I also interviewed secondary informants, including the department chairs in social studies and English, other teachers, the principal, and the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction.

Factors That Influence Curricular Choices

Through my exploratory case study of Mrs. Rosen's classroom curriculum, I discovered the pervasive influence of

professional and personal factors. Specifically, her personal values and experience carry the most weight in selection of content, texts, methods, activities, and evaluation across both subjects.

You bring the values that shape your life, that have shaped you . . . into the classroom. And if somebody is not big on human relations, there's going to be no mention of Martin Luther King. Look at what I do with economics! Half of the entire unit is totally my stuff, and it's totally looking at the economic problem . . . looking at relationships between people . . . No one else shows the same films or has the same approach. That's fine. Kids need to have all types of different value systems. What teachers emphasize is directly related to values and personal experience.

Student characteristics are the second greatest influence over Deborah's curricular choices, followed by a combination of professional knowledge and skills and collegial exchange. The 7th grade social studies curriculum comes from the district fully packaged along all five dimensions, but no such guidelines exist for English. In Deborah's words, "English is like a wide open landscape. There's no direction. It's like the public library . . . take out whatever you want!" Deborah's unfamiliarity with English—"I had . . . *still* have a bare background in English"—contrasts sharply with her familiarity with social studies, which she teaches "almost viscerally." Despite important distinctions between the two subjects, Deborah's pattern of influence remains *identical* across them.

Autonomy Over Curricular Decisions

An explanation for these findings lies in those factors that have little direct influence on Mrs. Rosen's curricular choices. Both professional and organizational norms support professional and personal autonomy. Little commu-

nication exists between various grade levels, various schools, or with the district office, autonomy reigns over individual classrooms. Parents provide Deborah Rosen with a strong source of professional and personal affirmation and support. (One family sent roses, another a hibiscus plant from Hawaii, and others shower her with cards and letters over the holidays.), and Deborah's relationships with her superiors reveal both professional respect and acknowledgment of teacher autonomy over classroom curriculum. In the words of Deborah's principal:

I do my best to portray that what happens in the classroom is the most vital aspect of the school. We arrange our supervision . . . we minimize all of that as much as possible with the assumption that what happens those five periods is 99 percent of what school is about. . . . The basic assumption is that teachers have knowledge and skill.

District and school curricular policy are framed to allow personal interpretation at the classroom level. The assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction describes his role as "providing guides and instructional assistance to teachers. I can put that instructional material in front of the teachers, and they can run with it." In this district, administrators vest teachers with the ultimate responsibility for curricular choice. In other districts where administrators may feel some teachers are marginally competent, more directives, more specified curriculum, and less classroom autonomy may prevail.

This constellation of factors—norms, parent contact, relationships between subordinates and superiors, and district and school policy—provides a supportive environment within which professional and personal factors, especially Deborah's personal values and experience, thrive. In those instances when professional autonomy and organizational environment conflict, Deborah Rosen subverts organizational directives to meet what she considers a higher obligation to professional and personal values.

I think teachers must be treated as professionals, and as I have again and again pointed out to you, they will do what they want to anyway. They will emphasize what they think is important. What I've learned through the years is, basically, don't make an issue that you're doing something different. Be very diplomatic. . . . It's important, even though you have extremely strong beliefs.

The Balance Between Autonomy and Obligation

Deborah brought her Russian unit "in the back door." After attending a special curriculum seminar on the Soviet Union, she and a colleague developed "a wonderful curriculum on the Russian children and culture . . . which is political dynamite." In deference to organizational norms and superiors, they gained permission to "spend two days on the Russian children" and proceeded to teach the unit for two to three weeks. After her assignment one fall to two English classes and one social studies class, Deborah arranged to swap with an English colleague saddled with two social studies classes. The two teachers bypassed the administrator responsible for the original scheduling and finalized the schedule switch with an upper-level administrator. Professional concerns overcome organizational obligations in such situations. In Deborah's words:

I may be totally wrong, but I have to act on my conscience. And this is what I have done for 17 years, because I've had very few competent administrators to work with so I work in spite of them. You become very proficient politically to go around them so they don't lose face because they're human beings with feelings.

Deborah Rosen's diplomacy in "going around" organizational obligations points to the limits placed upon her by a supportive environment. Professional and personal values shape Deborah's classroom curriculum and are reinforced by the organizational environment of the school and district within which she works. For Deborah to flaunt her organizational obligations would result in the organization withdrawing its support. Without such support, Deborah's ability to shape her classroom curriculum according to professional and personal values would be jeopardized.

The delicate balance between autonomy and obligation at both classroom and policy levels surfaces. The tension between professional autonomy and organizational obligation shapes Deborah Rosen's curricular decision-making process and helps determine her classroom curriculum.

Implications for School Practice and Policy

What implications may we draw from Deborah's experience for school practice and policy? In terms of practice,

the classroom curriculum offers a source of collegial exchange. The construction, evaluation, and revision of classroom curriculum represent a creative enterprise for teachers, which involves continual learning and professional growth and also consumes substantial amounts of time. The role of personal values and life experiences in this endeavor must not be underestimated. Administrative support in the form of seminars, conferences, and consultants broadens teachers' curricular knowledge base. Careful evaluation of student characteristics constitutes a crucial element of classroom curriculum construction—an undertaking requiring professional expertise. These issues define classroom curriculum as a professional concern.

And for classroom curriculum to benefit from the rich potential of collegial exchange, avenues for such exchange must be structured into the organization through district and school policy, relationships between subordinates and superiors, and organizational norms. Deborah has provided a starting point by independently observing her colleagues as they teach. The current organizational structure must be altered to provide opportunities for teachers to engage in such activities on a regular basis. The diversity of personal values and life experiences guiding classroom curricular practice must be recognized by the organization and worked with instead of against to more fully capitalize on the richness of curriculum potential. Finally, organizational consideration of the number of students per class and their range of abilities will address the number one priority of teachers—the students they teach. In Deborah's words, "The curriculum is the key to making that human being grow. You have a human being . . . that's the key." □

References

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