How Can the Curriculum Facilitate (or Hinder) Collaboration?

Mohammed K. Farouk

Collaboration is an essential element in establishing a school or classroom climate that promotes working together to accomplish common goals. Individuals and organizations can accomplish tasks more successfully when working together collaboratively. In today's world, teachers and students deal with complex issues such as conflict, bullying, and stereotyping. A successful approach to resolving such issues involves working together to understand differences in perspective, beliefs, and understandings. Collaboration is critical in an effective social studies program, especially given the fact that the social studies curriculum includes teaching students interpersonal and other social skills.

Who Collaborates?

Collaboration happens at various levels. Teachers collaborate among themselves and work as a school-wide team on developing the mission of their school. Teachers collaborate as a grade level team to develop curriculum or engage in lesson planning. They may collaborate with colleagues around the world electronically while working on common projects, as in the Global Learning and Observations to Benefit the Environment (GLOBE) Program (**www.globe.gov/globe_flash.html**). The GLOBE program involves primary and secondary schools worldwide in hands-on education activities that relate to the national social studies standards Ⓥ️ⅠⅠⅠ **SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND SOCIETY,** Ⓥ️ⅠⅠⅠ **PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENT, AND** Ⓘ️Ⅹ **GLOBAL CONNECTIONS.**

Students collaborate when they work in small cooperative learning groups or when they work electronically on joint projects with students in other places, as with the GLOBE program.. As a classroom example, students studying "Community" can develop a visual representation of their community by drawing pictures of what they think about their community. In such an activity, the teacher provides a large piece of butcher paper and markers for student use. Students work silently as they draw examples of "community." from their own experience of their neighborhood Students can work on the same paper or the paper may be cut into small pieces for small groups. No directions are given as to whether the students must work together or alone. After about ten minutes, students discuss their drawings and observations. The discussion may consider questions such as the following: Did they work individually or collaboratively? Did they know what others drew? Did others' drawings influence them? What is common in the drawings (e.g. people, buildings, animals)? Are some things missing? What is missing? Does the art reflect the best of the community or problems that need addressing? What would students add to improve their community? How could this be done?[1]

Family members collaborate with schools. Family-school collaboration often is aimed at solving specific issues, such as increasing student achievement, dealing with behavior problems, and improving school beautification. Community-school collaboration is another level of collaboration that may or may not be an outgrowth of family-school collaboration. In community-school collaboration, partnerships are formed with local businesses that sponsor school activities, or when students work with adults on topics that can help the community deal with issues such as recycling and litter control.[2]

The Curriculum's Effects on Collaboration

Curriculum may be defined narrowly as the course of study or a set of guidelines teachers use to develop content and skills that they impart to their students. It may be defined broadly to include all of the experiences provided in the school.[3] Regardless of how it is conceived, the curriculum is the vehicle for organizing and delivering instruction in school so students construct the knowledge, skills, and values identified as important for the development of the individual and society. Thus, the curriculum is a strong force affecting whether or not collaboration works.

The curriculum can facilitate collaboration. If teachers, for example, have a common planning time, they are more likely to work together in addressing their common curriculum problems and to support each other in resolving unique problems. Whether or not to foster such collaborative approaches to the curriculum is a decision that school leaders make depending on their philosophy and style of leadership.

The social studies curriculum lends itself to fostering collaboration due to the nature of its content, goals, and objectives. When teachers provide opportunities for students to collaborate among themselves and with their community to address local needs, powerful social studies becomes possible.[4] Collaboration among classmates and schoolmates occurs, for example, when peaceful conflict resolution is fostered and students recognize that they can best settle their differences to a dispute or conflict through collaboration. Teaching students collaborative

negotiation strategies is a part of peaceful conflict resolution. Such negotiation strategies and their role in peaceful conflict resolution then can be extended as students explore how conflicts beyond those in the classroom can be resolved. Now, collaboration is extended to the local community as peaceful resolution is sought to conflicts between siblings at home, residents of the neighborhood, and residents of the local community. Such social studies projects are especially powerful when school-wide or grade level teacher teams work together to foster student collaboration.

The curriculum fosters collaboration among teachers through its own integration. Curriculum integration involves making connections between different areas of knowledge rather than focusing on separate subject areas. This is beneficial for students as they enhance their understanding of the world as integrated rather than compartmentalized. Such a view makes learning more meaningful, as it raises student motivation.

Collaboration in integrating the curriculum empowers teachers and students as they develop a sense of ownership of the curriculum and of leadership in shaping it.

An Example: Community Safety

An example of curriculum integration that fosters collaboration is found in a unit of study focusing on community safety. Content about the theme is connected across the curriculum. For example, in social studies, students role-play scenarios focusing on various social skills including how to make friends, work together on activities with each other, encourage each other's participation, and stop name-calling. Students identify problem areas that affect safety, such as the flow of traffic within the classroom or lack of access to an in-room hand washing area. They consider safety issues in the local community, such as the difficulty children and adults have in crossing busy streets on their way to and from school. They discuss ideas for addressing these

safety problems, developing and trying out solution strategies.

In language arts, students write short stories or skits featuring characters being bullied or teased and the ways in which students could collaboratively deal with these events. They make a library display of books that discuss friendship and working together with others to solve problems.

In the area of foreign languages/global studies, students research the symbols used for public safety in different countries, whether accommodations are made for children's safe travel to and from school in other countries, and whether collaboration is stressed over competition in other cultures.

In math, students research and create a report on local crime statistics or survey students to find out how often they are teased, bullied, and pressured to conform by peers, tabulating and reporting statistics.

In science, students discuss the risk associated with smoking or drinking with family and friends and study how the human body reacts when experiencing strong emotions such as anger, love, hurt, fear, and joy. They research how community building has occurred through environmental activities such as the cleaning up of beach or empty lot clean-ups, maintaining community gardens, and conducting student-led recycling campaigns.

In physical education, students play noncompetitive games and invent new ones; learn age-appropriate strategies for what to do in risky situations and mentor younger children in sports as a means of community building.

Using the internet, students read about global events reported by newspapers in different countries or by different participants, comparing findings; and research student-created websites that discuss issues and events such as gun safety, peace forums, and anti-bullying campaigns. Students brainstorm ways that computers can be used for community building; for example, by setting up an e-mail listserve and sharing information about community events.

Integration & Collaboration

Service-learning is another example of integrated curriculum, through which students learn and reap the benefits of collaboration. The teacher guides students in identifying and selecting community projects that they will study, developing an action plan to address the issues to be addressed, and actually working in and with community agencies and/or individuals to find solutions. This process fosters an understanding that it takes working together in order to tackle common problems and issues that affect everyone in the community. At one school students identified the speed limit posted in front of their school as an issue because they felt it was too high, creating a dangerous situation for pedestrians. They identified two initial options. They could work with the local police to record the speeds of the cars going by and create a graph showing how fast cars are going. They could hold a car wash and survey adults bringing in their cars for a wash regarding the speed in front of the school. After deciding to use both methods to obtain data, they pursued both projects over several weeks, then collected and interpreted the data. Finally, the students prepared and gave a presentation to the city council requesting that the council immediately lower the speed limit in front of the school.

When teachers collaborate, they learn. Technology can facilitate collaboration enabling teachers to share ideas, lesson plans, materials, and experiences via e-mail or other electronic means.[5] Teachers share successes and failures and receive feedback from one another. This reduces the insecurities that teachers, especially beginning teachers, may have in revealing or admitting their weaknesses to their administrative supervisors. In turn, there is a contagious effect on students as they see their teachers planning and working collaboratively.

Conclusion

The curriculum hinders collaboration if its design is not integrated. When subjects are designed and taught as distinct, separate areas with no connection, this works against teachers' collaboration, which otherwise would focus their planning and instruction to achieve common goals. Certainly, if the general climate in a school is negative or neutral toward collaboration, it will not happen. School leaders must believe in the benefits of teacher collaboration and give time and support for teachers to be engaged in collaborative endeavors.

The curriculum can facilitate collaboration at a variety of levels depending on how the curriculum is defined and perceived by the community, school leaders, teachers, and family members. The benefits of collaboration among teachers, students, school, and the community far outweigh the disadvantages. The curriculum does not inherently facilitate or hinder collaboration; rather it is the individuals shaping the curriculum and its implementation who can make collaboration happen. ▧

Notes
1. C. B. Kaye, *The Complete Guide to Service-learning: Proven, Practical Ways to Engage Students in Civic Responsibility, Academic Curriculum, and Social Action.* (Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit, 2004).
2. Ibid.
3. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (n.d.). "A Lexicon of Learning - Curriculum."
4. June R. Chapin and R. G. Messick, *Elementary Social Studies: A Practical Guide,* 5th ed. (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2002); Cynthia Szymanski Sunal and Mary E. Haas, *Social Studies for the Elementary and Middle Grades: A Constructivist Approach,* 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2005).
5. Michael J. Berson, B. C. Cruz, J. A. Duplass, and J. H. Johnston, *Social Studies on the Internet,* 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2004).

Mohammed K. Farouk *is an associate professor of social studies/global education and director of the Global Awareness Program, College of Education, Florida International University, Miami, Florida.*