

TEACHERS AS CURRICULUM DEVELOPERS

In this formulation of curriculum development, Ben-Peretz postulates a “double role” for “teachers as developers and as autonomous implementers,” illustrating these ideas in “a case study curriculum project.”¹ She laments that “only rarely are teachers' own interests and concerns allowed to influence or direct the choices made by curriculum developers,” noting that “without active teacher involvement, curriculum development may turn out to be futile and ineffective.”² Ben-Peretz places classroom teachers at the centre of the curriculum development process, as their “responsibility for the construction of materials” helps “ensure individual and flexible implementation by other teachers using the materials in a variety of educational situations.”³

The principles for the project stemmed from Joseph Schwab's conception of “four commonplaces in curriculum development,” i.e. “subject matter, learner, teacher, and milieu,” commonplaces “to be co-ordinated in curriculum deliberations.”⁴ Ben-Peretz deems “the nature of the subject matter being taught and the nature of the anticipated learner [as] the main sources for curriculum deliberations that are taken into account by developers.”⁵ Given that “deliberation” is a term associated with the curriculum theory of Joseph J. Schwab, in Ben-Peretz's phrase “nature of the subject matter” are audible echoes of his conception of the structures of the disciplines,⁶ so central to the America's 1960s curriculum reform.

“In most curriculum projects,” Ben-Peretz complains, “teachers are perceived as the instrument for achieving developers' intentions,” likening “their role ... to the role of musicians who perform the creations of composers.”⁷ She continues: “A musician may give his own interpretation of a composition, but is not expected to rewrite it.”⁸ In Ben-Peretz's project, however, “teachers were perceived as originators of the curriculum, composers of their own ‘music’,” as “their knowledge, attitudes, concerns, and needs were the starting point of the curricular process.”⁹ After all, it is “teachers' expertise about classroom reality .. [that is] crucial for discerning practical problems that call for curricular remedies,”¹⁰ that last analogy reiterating what Kliebard called the ameliorative approach to curriculum development.¹¹

“Teachers have intimate knowledge of learners, classrooms, and school milieu,” Ben-Peretz reminds, “knowledge [that] allows teachers to point out weaknesses, shortcomings, and conditions which should and can be changed.”¹² This fact – that teachers are “sensitive to and knowledgeable about practical problem situations demands” – requires that they be “assigned a primary role in the curriculum process that starts with the locating of curricular problems.”¹³ Not only can they locate problems, they can solve them, as they are, in effect, “the immediate agents of change,” demanding that teachers' “own needs relating to awareness of prerequisites for implementation, anticipation of difficulties, and consideration of interpersonal

relationships be taken into account.”¹⁴ She concludes: “The only way of achieving this is by assigning teachers a central role in curriculum making, allowing them to voice their concerns and draw on their immediate expertise.”¹⁵

That expertise, Ben-Peretz continues, “allows teachers to play a more significant role in curriculum development without sacrificing the contribution of the other commonplaces,” enabling them to collaborate “with representatives of other bodies of knowledge ... [in] the articulation of the character of the problem discerned by teachers and for the seeking of alternative solutions.”¹⁶ Teachers, however, represent “the starting point of deliberation.”¹⁷ Other experts act in “an advisory capacity.”¹⁸ Ben-Peretz inverts the usual hierarchy of curriculum development, one that assigns teachers the role of implementers of policy-makers’ curricular decrees.

Ben-Peretz turns next to “the modular nature of the curriculum materials, the product of the development process,”¹⁹ a product with “unique characteristics,” the first of which it is multiple “packages” of “curriculum materials ... all dealing with the same topic, but differing in content, style, and instructional strategies,” due to the fact that “members of the development team may have different backgrounds, different orientations to subject matter and instruction, different teaching experiences, and different educational priorities.”²⁰ “These divergent viewpoints may find their expression in the variety of suggestions made by teachers in the course of curriculum development,” she notes (affirming, perhaps inadvertently, the democratic and dialogic nature of curriculum development in this schema); “in the absence of pressure for early closure and consensus, the curricular product may be in the form of a number of modular units, different embodiments of the same subject-matter topic.”²¹

While not emphasizing those “d” words, what Ben-Peretz does acknowledge is that her conception of curriculum “aims at providing maximum flexibility and openness for teachers involved in decision making,” an aim realized in the pluralistic nature of the curricular product,” a fact that “releases implementers from dependence on developers’ intentions,” reconceiving teachers-practitioners “as user-developers ... actively adapt[ing] external materials to specific situations.”²² In that conception of adaptation Ben-Peretz risks reinscribing concepts of implementation and application.²³

The unit Ben-Peretz chose for this case study project was a unit of a biology curriculum titled “Man in Nature.” The unit addressed the “Uniqueness of Man” and focused on the nervous system. Reviewing the development of this curriculum, Ben-Peretz found that each segment of the development process was “vital for its successful culmination.”²⁴ She felt sure that securing the support of the entire educational system (e.g., the ministry of education, supervisors, principals) was “critical for the success of the project.”²⁵ Indeed, the “Uniqueness of Man” project had the support of the Ministry of Education, reflected in the fact that the “teacher-developers received special payment for their work on the project,” a sign of “official recognition of the importance of their involvement in curriculum development.”²⁶ Biology supervisors were invited to participate; principals of the schools also supported the participation of

teachers in the project; the “overall message of these administrative arrangements, Ben-Peretz reports, “was that curriculum development by teachers was considered to be an accepted and viable strategy for curriculum development, even in a centralized educational system.”²⁷ Interesting that a bureaucratic hierarchy could accommodate academic freedom “on the ground,” if perhaps for instrumental reasons only.

Teachers not only participated, they were (Ben-Peretz reiterates) the “starting points of curricular deliberations,” consulted concerning the “nature of the curriculum problems as well as about subject-matter content and instructional strategies which should be included in the curriculum.”²⁸ Concerning the “Uniqueness of Man” project, she notes, “teachers made widely different suggestions and did not agree either on content or on instructional strategies.”²⁹ Despite “differences of opinion,” teachers accepted that “arriving at a consensus was acceptable,” a decision that is “contrary to the notion of constructing a curriculum product consisting of alternative versions for teacher choice.”³⁰ Ben-Peretz speculates that “teacher-developers were not familiar with a situation in which teachers were expected to choose among different curricular materials dealing with the same topic,” a situation they considered “unrealistic.”³¹ Teacher-developers believed that “complete coverage of the subject matter is a basic requirement for mastery of any scientific topic,” disabling them from accepting “alternative curricular versions that would portray partial views of the subject matter.”³² Consultation with subject-matter experts as well as with psychologists and other educators persuaded the teacher-developers that it was in fact legitimate to “construct alternative versions without distorting the subject matter.”³³

“The creation of curriculum materials started with learner activities being envisaged by teachers,” Ben-Peretz reports, so that “ends and goals being sought were considered at a later stage.”³⁴ The “advantages” of this sequence, she continues, were “twofold”: (1) teachers were afforded “the opportunity to draw upon their specific practical expertise and professional strength,” and (2) the question uppermost in many teachers’ minds - “What should I do in my own classroom?” – prompted planning.³⁵ Criteria included “potential for classroom use, appropriateness for student target population, and the personal priorities and preferences of the teachers.”³⁶

Formative evaluation was conducted by teacher-developers by assessing student’s attitudes and achievement and attitudes as well as soliciting “subject-matter experts’ opinion about the materials, and recording of teachers’ impressions of students’ reactions and responses.”³⁷ What was learned was incorporated into decisions about “content, instructional strategies, and learning activities.”³⁸ Teachers then deliberated over “possible learning outcomes of the various learning activities, considered the alternatives, and chose those they considered to be most appropriate.”³⁹

“The teacher-developers were responsible for the training of teachers who were involved in the formal trial runs,” Ben-Peretz continues, noting that this “in-service training was planned by teacher-developers in collaboration with subject-matter experts and supervisors” and “guided by an image of teachers as autonomous implementers

who would function as ‘user-developers’.”⁴⁰ Curriculum development here conferred upon “teachers a more active role in curriculum development,” affording them not only decisive influence in the selection and composition of materials but also “enhanced flexibility in the implementation of the materials.”⁴¹ Extrapolating from this project Ben-Peretz suggests that teachers generally “may function as grass-root developers in the context of local schools, preparing small curriculum units for use in their classrooms,” constructing “alternative versions of existing curriculum materials extending their use through change and adaptation to specific situations.”⁴² Even more expansively, Ben-Peretz concludes that “this experience could enhance their ability to function as autonomous decision makers in their professional capacity.”⁴³ I concur.

COMMENTARY

Ben-Peretz positions teachers as the primary agents in curriculum development, with subject matter specialists and supervisors performing advisory roles. Also noteworthy is that the curriculum produced was no single document but four, allowing for greater flexibility of implementation and, I would add, intellectual diversity. One of the world’s most important advocates for teachers, specifically their centrality in schooling, makes her case here persuasively. Intellectual historians of the field will note the influence of Schwab in her thinking as well as Ben-Peretz’s detailing and extension of his conception of deliberation, recontextualizing it in Israeli curriculum theory and practice. To see how that concept circulated in India, see Chacko 2015.

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ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Ben-Peretz 1980, 52.
- ² Ben-Peretz 1980, 53. While the observation seems true, I'd prefer less the effectiveness argument than an affirmation of the local, of the individual, and curriculum development as relying on academic knowledge to enable one to speak one's situation.
- ³ Ben-Peretz 1980, 53.
- ⁴ Ben-Peretz 1980, 53. See Schwab 1978; Block 2004.
- ⁵ Ben-Peretz 1980, 53. This is a point well-taken but Schwab's conception seems to render the four as equivalent, which in certain situations they conceivably could be, but in many others decidedly not, as one or two could easily predominate. Certainly subject matter matters, subject matter for me a double entendre: academic and human subjects, intertwined, hardly equivalent.
- ⁶ See Schwab 1964.
- ⁷ Ben-Peretz 1980, 54. This devaluation of teachers, rendering them instruments of others, is a complaint I also registered against critical pedagogy, which positioned teachers as only instruments of ideology: see Pinar 2011, chapter 1.
- ⁸ Ben-Peretz 1980, 54. Not "rewrite" it in a compositional sense, but the teacher – if circumstances allow – can perform it in her signature style, expressive of her

individuality, inviting other “orchestra” or “choir” members to join. Note that in this analogy a conductor is required to coordinate. Who might that be?

⁹ Ben-Peretz 1980, 54.

¹⁰ Ben-Peretz 1980, 54.

¹¹ Kliebard 1970 (1975).

¹² Ben-Peretz 1980, 54.

¹³ Ben-Peretz 1980, 54.

¹⁴ Ben-Peretz 1980, 54.

¹⁵ Ben-Peretz 1980, 54.

¹⁶ Ben-Peretz 1980, 54.

¹⁷ Ben-Peretz 1980, 54.

¹⁸ Ben-Peretz 1980, 55.

¹⁹ Ben-Peretz 1980, 55.

²⁰ Ben-Peretz 1980, 55-56.

²¹ Ben-Peretz 1980, 55-56.

²² Ben-Peretz 1980, 56. Here she references an early essay of F. Michael Connelly, before he (and D. Jean Clandinin) formulated narrative inquiry: Clandinin and Connelly 2000.

²³ “[A]pplying is reproducing something general in a concrete situation,” Aoki (2005 [1987], 154) observes, noting that “this reproductive view of application embraces the view that application is separated from understanding, and, in fact, follows it. It is an instrumental view.” He continues: “Mindfulness of the situation allows the person in the situation to recognize that application is a hermeneutic act, remembering that being in the situation is a human being in his becoming. This mindfulness allows the listening to what it is that a situation is asking” (2005 [1987], 155). “Hopefully,” Aoki (2005 [1987], 156) concludes, “the meaning of application is clearer. It is not the applying to a concrete situation of a given general that we first understand by itself, but it is the actual understanding of the general itself that a given situation constitutes for us. In this sense, understanding shows itself as a kind of effect and knows itself as such.”

²⁴ Ben-Peretz 1980, 56.

²⁵ Ben-Peretz 1980, 56.

²⁶ Ben-Peretz 1980, 56.

²⁷ Ben-Peretz 1980, 56.

²⁸ Ben-Peretz 1980, 58.

²⁹ Ben-Peretz 1980, 58.

³⁰ Ben-Peretz 1980, 58.

³¹ Ben-Peretz 1980, 58.

³² Ben-Peretz 1980, 58.

³³ Ben-Peretz 1980, 58.

³⁴ Ben-Peretz 1980, 59.

³⁵ Ben-Peretz 1980, 59.

³⁶ Ben-Peretz 1980, 59.

³⁷ Ben-Peretz 1980, 60.

³⁸ Ben-Peretz 1980, 60.

³⁹ Ben-Peretz 1980, 60.

⁴⁰ Ben-Peretz 1980, 60.

⁴¹ Ben-Peretz 1980, 61.

⁴² Ben-Peretz 1980, 61.

⁴³ Ben-Peretz 1980, 61.