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The Pandemic as Pedagogical Provender: A Response to “The Global Pandemic as Learning Opportunities about the World: Extending School Curriculum.”

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Abstract

In this article, Mary Beth Schaefer responds to Bogum Yoon’s essay, “The Global Pandemic as Learning Opportunities about the World: Extending School Curriculum,” published in *Middle Grades Review* (2020). Schaefer situates Yoon’s ideas for integrative curriculum within core philosophies of the middle grades movement and challenges the field to take up Yoon’s suggestions to engage all middle grades students in integrative global investigations of the pandemic; furthermore, Schaefer suggests that educators might use these investigations as a way to initiate conversations with middle grades students and educators in other countries to facilitate international discourses and global perspectives.

I started my teaching career in a large progressive urban middle school in the late 1980s. At that time, the school’s administration was playing with the idea of creating interdisciplinary teacher teams (math, science, social studies, special education, and English) to teach the same 125 students. I was hired as the English teacher to pilot this program. We five teachers were given an extra period each day for common planning; we had daily advisory and block scheduling. We went to middle school conferences together and strived to create learning experiences that were active, purposeful, and integrated. Our team flourished in all areas but curriculum integration. We struggled to push our subjects together in ways that made sense. We became fairly successful integrating social studies and English, but our world views were still disciplinary and so were our students’ views. The ideas of an integrative curriculum—student-centered and based on real world problems—were only just starting to be discussed in the field. We had no roadmap. Although we dabbled in interdisciplinary curriculum endeavors with varying degrees of success, integrative curriculum remained beyond our reach. By the early 1990s, I had left the progressive middle school (that had successfully implemented team teaching school-wide) and found myself 2000 miles away in a middle-school-in-name-only. I missed my team and our ongoing, endless efforts to create meaningful, coherent, interconnected curricula.

I discovered James Beane’s (1993, 1995, 1996) seminal work on integrative curriculum in my doctoral studies and was captivated by its possibilities. Beane provided conceptual frameworks and roadmaps that would have been

invaluable to our team. I was excited by the wave of integrated practices that followed. I thought the middle school movement had finally found a clear and stimulating way to provide middle grades students with curriculum that was challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant. At the same time, I admit that I felt a stabbing envy for the lucky teams that had the chance to work with their students in learning endeavors that mattered.

Although some educators and school districts embraced the promise and practice of integrated curriculum, especially in the middle to late 1990s, it faced strong, countervailing winds (Schaefer et al., 2016). Weilbacher (2020) writes, “During the late 1980s and for much of the 1990s, progressive middle level advocates saw hope in the possibility that an integrative curriculum could replace the separate subject approach...Flash forward to today, and I see virtually no tangible evidence that a movement ever occurred” (pp. 1-2).

In truth, engaging students in an integrative curriculum requires an incredible amount of effort and hard work. Furthermore, the push for standardized tests and nationalized standards creates conditions for a kind of conformity that works against the intensely personal ethos and purpose of integrative study. Publishing in 1995, Beane writes, “Curriculum integration begins with the idea that the sources of curriculum ought to be problems, issues, and concerns posed by life itself” (p. 616). Beane (1995) further suggests that organizing principles around curriculum integration “fall into two spheres: 1) self- or personal concerns and 2) issues and problems posed by the larger world”

(p. 616). Those concerns, problems and issues work against the ideas of a neat scope and sequence and standard assessments. Even finding problems and concerns for integrative endeavors can be fraught and contested. The movement that once held such promise is, for Weilbacher (2020) now reduced to engaging in integrative processes in “a tiny private school that is really not much larger than most classrooms” (p. 2). What can middle grades educators do to reignite the movement and restart the integrative curriculum process? Fortunately for middle grades students and educators, Bogum Yoon has written an essay with a shovel-ready focus for integrative curriculum: the global pandemic.

In her essay, Yoon provides a plethora of opportunities to reinvigorate the integrative curriculum movement by transforming the COVID-19 pandemic into topics of learning that can cut meaningfully across content and interest areas. Yoon frames her ideas for relevant curriculum in terms of literacies (global, critical, and multicultural) and builds on her considerable experiences as a teacher, scholar, and mother to create exciting ideas and opportunities for investigation. As a topic for integrative study, the pandemic is ripe and rife with possibilities. One of the horrors of the COVID-19 pandemic is also an opportunity: it is difficult to imagine a community in the United States that has not been affected by the outbreak. Indeed, middle grades students, many of whom have been thrust into school-at-home situations due to local outbreaks (Schaefer et al., 2020) have had firsthand experience with the problems, issues and concerns that surround the pandemic. It is a life problem. It is a global problem. Yoon echoes Beane’s call for a curriculum that focuses on search for self and global meaning, writing that global literacy, for example, “focuses on promoting global perspectives as a way to understand ‘self’ and ‘others’ around the world” (p. 2). From an intensely personal and social perspective, Yoon suggests powerful opportunities for integrative investigations around the pandemic.

The pandemic also presents opportunities for an exchange of global perspectives. The importance of engaging middle grades students in global awareness and discourse has been noted as a key feature of middle level learning (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Mertens et al., 2009) and is a welcome focus and organizing principle of this issue of *Middle Grades Review*. Yoon points out

that the COVID-19 pandemic “can provide authentic learning opportunities that take students beyond their own communities into building global perspectives that reflect on the interconnectedness of the world communities” (p. 6). Integrative curriculum with a focus on the pandemic provides opportunities for student-centered investigations into problems and issues that are authentic, personal, and relevant. Further, integrative investigations around the pandemic can pique students’ curiosity and elicit hunger for knowledge about other cultures and ways of life. The pandemic provides a compelling lens into the lives of others; middle grades students can begin with personal common connections (how, perhaps, middle grades students in other countries deal with the effects of the pandemic) and from there, examine differences that can lead to complex discussions and understandings of other cultures.

We need to cultivate international middle grades partnerships so that students and educators learn from and about each other (Ellerbrock et al., 2018; Mertens et al., 2009). The pandemic, with its far-reaching impact on students’ lives, provides a present, compelling problem for students to explore; further, as an organizing principle, the pandemic provides avenues of connection to other countries. Middle grades students and teachers can communicate across countries to build authentic discourse based on common experience. Dialogue enables us to enter into historical conversations in ways that encourage middle grades students and educators to mediate their horizons of understanding and build new knowledge, new appreciations, and more complex understandings of diverse communities. Ironically, the effects of the pandemic that have proven so isolating can also help to bring us together. Indeed, working together across the globe, we can ignite students’ interests and reinvigorate integrated curriculum.

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