5 Elements of a Relevant Curriculum
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By examining curriculum with focus on key elements of effective learning, educators can gain clarity about what they are teaching and why.

The vision and mission statement of a school, which lays out its aims and goals, is a commitment to the community the school serves, and most important, to its students. As teachers and students continue to face challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic, civic instability, and political divisions, they need curriculum and instructional practices that truly align with the more long term, desired outcomes for students found in school mission and vision statements: thinking skills, social-emotional competencies, civic practices, and cultural understandings, to name a few. Without strong alignment of these values with everyday instructional practices, it is difficult to address the needs of students, and students are often unprepared for the world outside of school when they need to solve unknown and unfamiliar problems, interact with those whose lives are different than their own, or use self-management and self regulation strategies to achieve their goals.

In my latest book for ASCD, Making Curriculum Matter: How to Build SEL, Equity, and Other Priorities Into Daily Instruction, I share the "Curriculum That Matters Framework" that I developed for aligning curriculum and instruction with valued outcomes for student learning. The framework identifies five elements that serve as lenses for evaluating curriculum and instruction to determine strengths and areas for improvement and for guiding the design process.

Changing the lens for reviewing or designing curriculum helps educators avoid a common pitfall of curriculum design: adding more to what teachers already do in the classroom. Examining the curriculum for how each element is supported allows for more strategic revision and implementation. For example, a curriculum that includes discussion as a learning activity likely engages students in deep thinking and teaches them the social skills for interacting with each other - two elements of the Curriculum That Matters Framework. In developing and implementing a high-quality curriculum that aligns to the elements of the framework, teachers can use instructional practices that attend to the whole child, and most important, provide all students with the opportunity to learn.

Let's look at examples of how to align curriculum and instruction to the elements of the Curriculum That Matters Framework, and how doing so can impact student learning. These five elements include practices, deep thinking, social and emotional learning, civic engagement, and equity.

The Five Elements of the Curriculum That Matters Framework

1. Practices

Practices are used by students to apply an idea, a belief, or a method to construct understanding. For example, modeling is a mathematical practice; when students create models in math, it deepens their understanding of a concept. In scientific modeling, students create diagrams, drawings, and physical representations to make sense of scientific phenomenon. With routine use, students see the practice of modeling as a tool for learning. In curricula, the specific practices that will be taught and assessed in a unit should be listed alongside the content standards. A curriculum that fosters students' use of effective practices will engage students in authentic tasks that allow them to see how practices are used in the real world. For example, in an elementary classroom, students might design a model of a structure that could meet a need in their community and consider the natural environment in which it would be found, such as benches for visitors to the nearby park, an outdoor classroom for the school, or a little free library for the neighborhood.

In the classroom, teachers can bring students' attention to practices as tools for learning by including them as part of the learning target and explicitly teaching students how to use them. For example, "I can use a model to determine area and perimeter" would be a learning target for a lesson in the design project. In social studies, the practice of evaluating evidence from diverse sources would be addressed in the learning target, "I can evaluate an argument by determining the date, author, audience, purpose of the source." When practices are included in learning targets and consistently used with students, students develop a cognitive tool they can use independently from the teacher. As students experience success, they see themselves as capable learners. When applying the practices to authentic situations, students learn more about the work people do in different fields and see possibilities for their future selves.

2. Deep Thinking

Deep thinking occurs when thinking moves from a general understanding of content and concepts to the application, extension, and creation of new ideas. A curriculum that addresses deep thinking will include curriculum-embedded performance assessments like project-based learning, place-based learning, and service learning. These all involve multistep, complex tasks that take place over time, involve individual and group work, and provide opportunities for feedback and revision.

Students use different types of thinking as they progress through these tasks. They build and refine their knowledge as they work to plan, apply and create, and revise their work based on additional learning. As they go through this process, students benefit from classroom lessons that target specific types of thinking. For example, students might analyze data to determine how people spend their time in the park using a "Here's What, So What, Now What" protocol. The thinking demand of the lesson analyze-is paired with an appropriate protocol. Students can use the protocol with any set of data or information (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The "Here's What, So What, Now What" Protocol

Here's What: A literal restatement of the data presented	So What: An interpretation of the data presented	Now What: Ideas for what should happen as a result
Six out of every 10 visitors fish in the lake.	Fishing is very popular for the people visiting the park.	The park could use benches for the people who fish.

When students engage in tasks that allow them to make decisions about their learning ("What structure would you like to design?") regarding matters that concern them ("Who in your community would benefit from your design?"), they are more likely to engage and persist through the productive struggle necessary for deep thinking to occur.

3. SocialEmotional Learning (SEL)

SEL includes the skills and strategies for understanding and managing oneself, appreciating and developing relationships with others, and making responsible decisions. Often these competencies are taught separate from the core curriculum. In the Curriculum That Matters Framework, they are integrated into content curriculum and instruction where they are needed most.

In curriculum, units of study can be organized around essential questions and big ideas that examine the SEL competencies. For example, in a high school English language arts classroom, students could examine an essential question (What makes a person's identity?) and a big idea (Students understand that there are many factors that impact one's identity and that certain aspects may feel more central to one person than others) to learn more about self-awareness and social awareness. As students read texts on identity, they can discuss characters' identity characteristics and how those characteristics impact the character's life-and then make connections to how their own identity characteristics affect their experiences. In addition, students develop metacognitive skills when they are routinely asked to reflect on their learning during daily instruction through questions such as:

- What did you do well?
- What caused you to struggle?
- What strategy worked for you?

- What do you know about perseverance that will help you to work through a difficult question?

When students become aware of their own learning strategies and recognize when meaning-making is breaking down and what they can do about it, they develop as self-regulated, independent learners.

4. Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is active participation as a local, state, national, or global community member. In the classroom, it occurs when the community serves as an authentic audience for student work. For example, in the elementary design project mentioned above, students first research a need in their community and then write a recommendation for a structure that will meet that need and send it to the appropriate audience for approval. When students engage in their community, they develop human and social capital helpful to achieving their goals. They also are more likely to participate in their community as adults. Civic engagement begins with discourse. In the identity unit, students could read and discuss texts that explore the complexity of one's identity. The teacher will need to provide structures and protocols to support students as they discuss the many aspects of their identities and society's portrayal and treatment of diverse identity groups. As a result, students are better prepared to engage in hard conversations outside of school and take action on issues that matter to them.

5. Equity

Equity is recognizing and honoring the individualized attributes of students (culture, race, ethnicity, religion, disability status, class, sexual orientation, and gender identity) and eliminating practices that prevent students from reaching their full potential. As students interact with each element of the framework, they work toward high expectations; mentally and emotionally engage in their learning; develop human and social capital; and develop as self-regulated learners all important principles of equity. The equity lens focuses on providing students with a "mirror and window" on the world. Students need to see themselves in what they are learning (the mirror) and learn more about those whose lives and experiences are different than their own (the window) (Style, 1996).

One way curriculum can create "mirror and window" elements is through units of study that help students answer important identity questions. For example, in STEM units, these questions could be:
- Who do I see as mathematicians, scientists, and engineers?
- How do I see myself as a learner of mathematics, science, or engineering?
- How does what I am learning apply to me and my community?
- How do I see my future self as a mathematician, scientist, or engineer?

Students are able to answer these questions when they study the contributions of people of different cultures, races, ethnicities, religions, abilities, sexual orientation, and gender identities in these fields; when they develop a growth mindset to face challenges in subjects they may have found difficult or not have identified with in the past; and when they authentically apply what they are learning to their lives. In daily instruction, students

can also work with texts and resources that include characters and people of different cultures, races, ethnicities, religions, abilities, classes, sexual orientation, and gender identities and that are written by authors from these diverse groups. These materials and related learning activities represent characters, people, and events in accurate and appropriate cultural and historical contexts, dispel stereotypes, present multiple points of views, and center the lives and experiences of historically underrepresented and marginalized peoples (Bryan-Gooden, 2019).

Clarity for Learning

When teachers engage in the curriculum design or revision process by focusing on key elements of effective learning, they gain clarity about what they are teaching and why and discuss meaningful practices, which results in more purposeful implementation in the classroom. Students in turn will engage in learning experiences that honor who they are and their experiences and develop their thinking and social-emotional skills to choose and pursue their own pathways in life.

References

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