

Understanding the Impact of Public Discourse on Teacher Autonomy in Rural Schools

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Introduction

This project arose out of an experience I had as a teaching assistant in a rural public school in southern Indiana. Observing a lesson on the writing of the constitution using mandated curriculum, it was clear that the teacher was presenting content that provided only one perspective. During this time, the Indiana House and Senate had presented two bills that would have further impacted how and when teachers could alter curriculum to bring in additional content to further children's understanding of a variety of experiences in our pluralistic society. This action resulted in educators reporting alteration of content and fear of retribution for teaching with a lens of equity (Christopherson, 2022; Dunn et al., 2018). This project aims to uncover how teachers in rural elementary schools make decisions about content and whether public discourse (through political processes, familial concerns, or administration) impacts what they choose to include or exclude.

Research Questions

1. How, if at all, does public discourse impact teacher autonomy in rural K-6 schools?
2. How do teachers in rural communities make decisions about the content they include or exclude in their classrooms?
3. Which, if any, of the public comments have the greatest impact on what teachers choose to include or exclude from the content they deliver in the classroom?

Methods

Recruitment

Indiana Small and Rural Schools Association, IUPUC Advisory Boards, and personal contacts to rural schools received an email invitation to participate in a focus group.

Participants

Six white, female, K-6 teachers ages 25-55+ from rural schools in southern Indiana were recruited for the first focus group. Four completed this portion of the study.

Data Collection

A forty-five-minute focus group invited teachers to respond to the following questions:

What impacts your decisions to include or exclude specific material from mandated curriculum?

How, if at all, do school board meetings and decisions impact your curricular decisions in the classroom?

How, if at all, does individual parent input impact your curricular decisions in the classroom?

Analysis

The Zoom transcript was evaluated to identify emerging themes through a process of coding teacher responses to the posed questions. Several themes emerged and are identified in the Findings section.

Initial Findings

Omission

Teachers reported that it was just easier to leave content out of the curriculum and not address certain topics. One teacher reported that she just left out discussion on Columbus Day because she "didn't want to open any issues."

Transparency

Opening up classrooms and providing clear and direct information about content to families was cited as a way to alleviate parental concerns. "I've started, like, giving that information up front and just being open." They also reported that they invite parents into their classrooms to view their teaching and utilize messaging apps like Class Dojo to "keep the lines of communication open."

Avoiding Controversy

In order to eliminate parental or community concerns from public and individual input, schools have implemented a flow chart to identify which topics or content can be covered. In attempting to avoid controversy, some teachers just reverted to *omission* as the best strategy rather than modify or alter the curriculum.

Homogeneity

Teachers reported fewer concerns about public discourse at school board meetings or in the news and more concerns about individual parent concerns. They attributed this to the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in their schools. Teachers considered that they're not seeing this public outrage because families in their communities are not impacted by differing viewpoints about the curriculum.



Limitations

- Data is coming from one small focus group.
- Recruitment occurred during spring break, which limited access to teachers.
- Teacher demographics and locations were the same or similar, possibly limiting perspectives.
- Proposed bills did not pass, which may have impacted educator responses at the time of the focus group.



Conclusions

We found that public discourse from parents does impact what teachers decide to teach and how they intend to modify the curriculum. The teachers actively thought about public perception and reception of their teaching materials, methods, lesson content, and the way children might share that with their parents prior to implementation. Responding to parent concerns, teachers omitted material and took great steps to avoid controversy while making their classrooms as transparent as possible. These actions from teachers indicated a strong alignment to reading and math standards without providing additional engaging sources out of fear of parental feedback delivered publicly or privately.

Next Steps

- Continue recruiting for two more focus groups.
- Use data from focus groups to inform the development of an online survey.
- Apply for an OSR grant for 2023 to develop and implement the online survey to reach a wider group of participants.

References

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