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A Curriculum of Reflexivity: (Re)Imagining Education Through Action Research and Saudi Vision 2030

Boni Wozolek

In his work on reflexivity, Pierre Bourdieu (2001) wrote that the process of inquiry is not unidirectional. Instead, he argued that the sciences must function like a mirror, bidirectional in that they should reflect not only the sociocultural and political context of a place but also the layered contexts and perspectives of the researcher. Building on scholarship that similarly attends to reflexivity, scholars like Deleuze and Guattari (1972), Massey (2005), and Puar (2017) argue that there must also be an explicit attention to multiplicity in terms of voices, perspectives, analysis, and contexts that are all central to research.

Reflexivity—which is understood in this article to be a dynamic process of awareness where one analyzes a context by thinking about the multiple layers, including one’s own way of being, knowing, and doing, that contribute to the ontoepistemology (Barad, 1999) of a space and place—is argued here to be imbricated but not mutually exclusive with reflection. Reflection, then, is thinking about a context without perhaps considering the co-constituted subjectivities within a space. In terms of research, reflection is akin to antiquated models of data analysis and representations where a researcher portrays a context as if she did not have an impact on the space by participating in it (Behar, 1996). Reflexivity, however, is central to thinking critically about entanglements that are central to the “everydayness” of a place.

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Schools and systems of schooling require similar attention to, and inclusion of, reflexive practices when working to construct or deconstruct norms and values that are inherent to everyday experiences in schools. As educators across the globe have noted (e.g., Elyas & Picard, 2010; Lunn Brownlee, Ferguson & Ryan, 2017; Sabzalian, 2019), the art of thinking deeply about learning as it exists within systems, of which the teacher is often an inextricable part,¹ is central to disrupting everyday oppressions that happen in educational contexts. While there are many inroads to enacting change in schools through research, foregrounding reflexivity through action research continues to be a strong, and frequently invoked, way to think critically about educational practices, policies, and possibilities (Hersted, Ness, & Friemann, 2019). For example, in schools that use Western models of education, action research remains one way to combat the top-down, standardization that continue to negatively impact students in general and, specifically, marginalized youth.

Presented in this special issue are thought-provoking essays that are inherently reflexive and can be thought of entrees to action research. Building on the Saudi Vision 2030 initiatives, students worked with Arizona State University to think critically about traditional and contemporary education in Saudi Arabia, consider the possibilities and challenges presented under Saudi Vision 2030, and observe how schools in the United States have shaped educational practices in ways that might inspire them when re-envisioning schools and systems of schooling at home. They also studied action research to use as a tool upon their return to Saudi Arabia to implement what they observed while in the U.S.

This issue is significant for at least the following reasons. First, the authors speak to an array of curricular spaces and physical places that can be improved within their home context. For example, authors Aldehbashi and Algahtani explored the significance of makerspaces in schools, while Alghamdi investigated technology in the classroom, and Alshehri discussed students with behavioral concerns. Further, Alsalem described the development of critical thinking skills, while Alzahrani considered the benefits of flexible seating, Altaleb inquired about growth mindsets, Alshammari addressed the necessity for schools to be flexible across contexts, and Alotaibi addressed transition services that were available to students in her immersion experience. Educational reform is never a straight path. What is presented in this issue are a robust set of concerns, each significant in that they collectively indicate how systemic change might be engendered and maintained through each topic addressed.

Second, the articles provide a collective, nuanced picture of potential educational reforms under Saudi 2030. For example, Alsalem writes that the Ministry of Education is seeking to equip teachers and students with the “tools they need to face modern life” while Alshehri discusses the initiative’s aim to improve teaching methods and create positive school culture. As scholars have articulated (e.g., Carlson, 2009; Gershon, 2012; Khan, Grijalva & Enriquez-Gates, 2019; Ng, 2008), while shared directions are important to reform, one-size-fits-all models

often only deepen marginalizing structures while silencing those who do not share a consensus perspective. This special issue is polyphonic (Bakhtin, 1981) in that contributors identified as challenges and possibilities in their home schools and within the context of schools they observed in the U.S., but also within the possibilities highlighted that are central to Saudi 2030 itself as it intersects and is knotted with educational reform.

Finally, this issue is important because it can form and inform a curriculum of reflexivity. The “curriculum” is often mischaracterized through a narrow lens that views “curriculum” only as the lessons that are formally, and intentionally, taught by teachers. Items like textbooks, along with local and less local standards, are frequently thought to compose what people often perceive as *the* curriculum. However, curriculum theorists have argued that there are multiple curricula at work in schools—from what is intended, or the formal curriculum (Apple, 1993; Page, 1991), to what is left out, or the null curriculum (Eisner, 1985). These curricular ideas work in conjunction with the what is learned through everyday events and cultures, or the hidden curriculum (Giroux & Penna, 1983), and what is learned by inter/intra²-acting with others, or the enacted curriculum. While I will not expand on these theories here, it is important to note that learning is ubiquitous across contexts and layers of scale in schools. When a teacher has engaged in reflexive practices, as the authors have in this special issue, the impact can be multifaceted. While teachers and administrators use action research and reflexive practices to learn how to improve on pedagogies and policies, students also have the opportunity to observe and, depending on how the action research is structured, participate in reflexivity.

One could argue that reflexive inter/intra actions in the classroom contribute to an enacted curriculum of reflexivity—lessons about the significance of reflexive ways of being, knowing, and doing that are engendered and maintained through the entangled relationship of teachers, students, and, in this case, action research. For example, if a teacher is thinking critically about gender equity and inclusion—a concern that some of the authors raised in this issue—she might use action research to change how she structures her lessons and inter/intra actions with students to be more equitable. She will then record the outcomes, analyze the data, and perhaps change how she teaches to include new pedagogical tools rooted in reflexive practices that are inherent to action research. However, depending on the teacher’s desired level of transparency,³ students might be aware of the teacher’s desire to improve her practice and emulate reflexive ways of being in their own lives.

Finally, I would like to conclude with some thoughts that might be helpful in deepening the strong and timely scholarship presented in this special issue. As with all qualitative research, but particularly observations that occur in different social and cultural contexts, it is important to recognize that practices are not always generalizable. Perhaps more significantly, without acknowledging the problematic nature of generalizability, the practices implemented through action

research that were meant to disrupt classroom and school concerns might yet reinforce them or, worse, continue or create various forms of oppression.

Similarly, it is also important to recognize that even within the U.S., schools are diverse in the degrees of privilege that students experience. This is often place-based due to raced and racist policies, such as redlining. Attending to the diversity of any place observed that is outside of the future research context might be helpful in allowing teachers and administrators to critically consider the nuances that are central to their home schools, students, and communities. To be clear, this is not to say that contributors in this issue did not consider or discuss these ideas. There were, for example, several articles that addressed what it might mean to transfer what was observed in the U.S. to Saudi Arabia. Rather, this is an attempt to be an explicit push against neoliberal standardization that is rampant in the U.S. It is also intended to serve as a warning to those considering the challenges and possibilities within schools and systems of schooling in the U.S. as they might be transferred or applied to another cultural context.

What is presented in this special issue are beautifully composed essays that recognize a diversity of concerns and the multiplicity through which Saudi Vision 2030 might be applied to educational contexts. Further, the action research that contributors present can be read as a curriculum of reflexivity, one that can inspire and maintain critical thought and actions among students, teachers, administrators, and broader communities. In short, these essays convey more than what the authors did and will do. That is that they express something perhaps more exciting to the world of education—hope. The hope that with time, attention, and care, all those who have a stake in education in Saudi Arabia will work to improve and strengthen not just the sociopolitical and cultural context but the lives of students who have the joy of experiencing teachers and administrators who, with the encouragement of the government, are striving to do and be better in their practice.

Notes

¹ While this article explores educational contexts that foreground teachers, it is important to note that learning happens across spaces and places. This means that teachers are not the “key” to learning, a point of which reflexive educators are often well aware and consider when making curricular and pedagogical decisions.

² The use of “intra” is intentional in that it calls attention to what Barad (2007) discusses as intra-actions—or the coconstituted subjectivities that arise from bodies being in contact with each other through an event. While not the focus of this paper, it is important to pause and be explicit with the notion that bodies—both human and nonhuman—inter and intra-act in schools and throughout systems of schooling. For more on this discussion, please see the following references: Barad (2007), Rosiek (2018), Snaza, Sonu, Truman & Zaliwska (2016), Wozolek (2021), among others.

³ To be clear, I do not believe that students need to be involved and informed about all processes that happen in the classroom. However, there are moments, either during or after data collection, that a teacher might wish to reveal what and why she is researching a

particular topic to encourage students to think critically about ideas or ideals the teacher is addressing.

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