Chapter 11
Locating Shakespearean Familial Curriculum in Secondary Contexts

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is based on a formal study of one community’s familial curriculum (Huber, Murphy, & Clandinin, 2011) in the context of Shakespeare. The families that participated in this narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) discussed how Shakespeare’s work influenced their family life. The findings from this study are used to discuss what is considered by some to be a dichotomy of curriculum in school and home. The author also uses this study to explore notions of nationalized or common curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

The work of British poet and playwright William Shakespeare is persistently taught in secondary literature classes in the United States and in other English-speaking countries and contexts and has been for quite some time. Recently, pieces of Shakespeare’s work are promoted in the United States’ Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (2012). Specifically, The Tragedy of Macbeth, The Tragedy of Hamlet, and Sonnet 73 are used as text exemplars for sample performance tasks at the secondary level. Additional plays are also mentioned in the sample text section of the CCSS. These suggestions were provided, according to the CCSS document itself, not as a list of texts that teachers have to teach, or students have to read, but to indicate the level of complexity that students should be taught at various grade levels.

It should be noted that Americans, as well as people around the world, value Shakespeare’s work outside formal school settings. The Open Source Shakespeare site (www.opensourceShakespeare.org) hosted nearly 4 million visitors from 2006–2012. These visitors logged over 20 million page views. Most of the visitors were from the English-speaking countries of the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, but western European nations also generated large amounts of traffic. A large number of visitors were also from Brazil, China, Egypt, India, and Turkey.

Shakespeare’s popularity can be argued based on his presence in social media. His Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/WilliamShakespeareAuthor?fref=ts) has nearly 4.4 million “likes”
and over 40,000 individuals all over the world are commenting and discussing his work in just the Facebook format. The most popular age range for his fans is 18–24 and the most popular city is Cairo, Egypt. By contrast, Stephenie Meyer, author of the Twilight vampire romance series has less than 1 million likes and 589 people are talking about her on Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/pages/Stephenie-Meyer/108380102517046?fref=ts). Even J.K. Rowling, author of the mega-hit Harry Potter Series, has only 1.6 million likes and 15,000 conversations (https://www.facebook.com/JKRowling?fref=ts). Clearly, Shakespeare is not yet a forgotten author and he has some pull with late adolescent and early adult audiences. In addition, these authors like Meyer, Rowling, and others reference Shakespeare’s work in their own as do even monumentally popular television figures like the Simpsons, who have 64 million “likes” (https://www.facebook.com/TheSimpsons).

My specific research puzzle focused on familial curriculum (Huber, Murphy, & Clandinin, 2011) and how aspects of Shakespeare study might be embedded in familial curriculum among my students in a larger contextual milieu that includes the new CCSS (2012). As I proceeded with this research, I uncovered Shakespearean curriculum in the community context among the families that I lived alongside in this inquiry. The purpose of this chapter is to account for how several families have composed lives with threads of community, literacy, and Shakespeare and discuss the implications of these threads for curriculum, both official and unofficial, in and out of school.

BACKGROUND

This chapter about the familial curriculum and Shakespearean understandings requires a review of theoretical perspectives in two categories. The first is curriculum. That is what I will attend to immediately. The second is teaching the work of Shakespeare, which I will outline afterward.

Defining Curriculum

Curriculum usually consists of two pieces, according to Cremin (1971). The first piece is the entire range of experiences that occur in unfolding the abilities of an individual. This range of experiences occurs in many settings and aligns with Clandinin and Rosiek’s (2007) explanation of John Dewey’s assertion that inquiry of any sort should result in a new relationship between individuals and their environments. In other words, experiences that are inquired into will result in new orientations to ideas, individuals, and various subject matters.

The second element of Cremin’s (1971) definition of curriculum describes a series of directed activities that occur in school. Increasingly, this notion of curriculum includes reference to a set of official documents outlining what concepts must be taught to students and in what order. Such documents are usually developed at a central office or geographically regional level, and the individuals who draft the documents are on teams composed of scholars and practicing teachers, and even representatives from community groups. These entities strive to form a consensus as they take into account a variety of factors, such as what is known about the developmental cognitive capacity of children of different ages and what are acknowledged as best practices in a domain like literacy or in a given subject area. The goal of official curriculum is nearly always some broad outcome like achieving college or career readiness. These goals are specifically articulated in the CCSS (2012).

There are a number of criticisms of official curriculum. For example, Noddings (1996) questions the assumption that all students will benefit from learning the same or highly similar material. The United States and many other countries are built on stratified economies that require workers to have a wide range of skills and dispositions and which remunerate at a range of levels guided by political and social forces, rather than inherent worth. If, Noddings argues, everyone learns