Education: Reflections on a Long-term Investment

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# Introduction

*“AN INVESTMENT IN KNOWLEDGE ALWAYS PAYS THE BEST PERCENTAGE OF INTEREST.”*

Fred B. Barker

The above words have been ringing in my ears for two decades. Fred B. Barker was my Papaw, a man of great wisdom. Thirty years ago he purchased me a set of medical encyclopedias and proceeded to record a special message and words of wisdom inside the cover of each. Reading his words as an adult, he somehow seemed to know the path I would take. The message above, the first he wrote, epitomizes my path so far and defines the one that continues.

Learning is a lifelong process and does not stop with earning a “terminal degree.” When one segment of the journey ends, such as completion of doctoral coursework and the presentation of the qualifying assessment, another one (writing a dissertation) begins. The knowledge and experiences gained from the doctoral program have prepared me for the next step. There have been many new experiences to this point including conducting both qualitative and quantitative research, presenting at national and international conferences, having articles published, designing and teaching online courses at the graduate level, serving as chairperson for the Doctoral Student/Faculty Seminar and building lifelong relationships with professors and fellow students.

This paper provides the reader with insight into my educational background and my rationale for pursuing a doctoral degree. My educational and professional experiences have been the driving force behind my educational journey. After explaining how I reached this point, the paper highlights the collaborative, research based and scholarly activities experienced during my doctoral coursework, as well as how that coursework increased my depth of knowledge regarding curriculum and instruction. In closing, the paper summarizes my readiness to begin the dissertation process.

# Evolution of Goals

*“PLEASURE SOON EXHAUSTS US AND ITSELF ALSO, BUT ENDEAVOR NEVER DIES.”*

Fred B. Barker

In Pinar et al, (2004) Cleo Cherryholmes describes the process of curriculum development as naturally full of conflict and unstable, and like the continual evolution of our own personal theories, the process of developing curriculum is “one of construction followed by deconstruction by construction” (p. 489). The educational journey that led me to join the doctoral program has also been full of conflict and instability. My ideas about who I wanted to be and what I wanted to do were continually constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed. Teachers have the opportunity and power to make a difference in the lives of their students. My decision to become a teacher was a result of my early educational experiences involving one such teacher.

Mr. Jarrett was my band director and he believed in me when no one else did. As a child my asthma was severe. When it came time to decide whether or not to join band in the 5th grade, my parents were skeptical about investing in an instrument I would not have the lung power to play. Mr. Jarrett is a kind man who saw something in me that others and even I could not. He urged my parents to let me try, and sent me home with a shiny flute. The confidence Mr. Jarrett had in me bolstered my spirits and, never being one to back down from a challenge I attempted to make sound with the head joint immediately. Success came within the first day and the constant breath control required to play helped build my lung capacity making my asthma almost disappear.

I loved playing in the band and the teacher who believed in me. That same teacher guided me throughout middle school and high school, teaching me responsibility, perseverance, collaboration, empathy, leadership and most importantly, to believe in myself. With enough practice and hard work, great things are possible

Knowledge is power and education is very valuable. As my father says, it is something you earn and it can never be taken away from you. As a beginning teacher I was engulfed in idealism. The main premise of my undergraduate educational philosophy was that all children can learn and deserve equal educational opportunities. Equality for all is an integral part of my personal values and it transcends to my professional work. Gaining as much knowledge as possible in order to stay current and do the best possible job for my students was important to me. This desire to keep learning led me to enroll at Marshall and obtain an M.A. in Elementary Education.

Not long after completing the M.A., my idealism took a nose dive upon the realization that the world of education was not as it seemed. My experiences soon brought to light the reasons Mr. Jarrett was always at odds with the school administration for some reason or another throughout my eight years in the band program.

Until my teaching career began, I had no idea the difficulties that related arts teachers like Mr. Jarrett face on a daily basis. My positive lived experiences and idealism were shattered by what poststructuralists like McLaren (2011) call the ‘system’ moving me from idealist to pessimist. The entire situation boiled down to concepts that lie at the center of the poststructuralist tradition - language, power and representation. In order to become empowered and rise above the situation, I needed to gain some new knowledge to execute change for myself, other teachers in similar situations and our students. According to Pinar et al (2004), poststructuralists seek to “repudiate, dismantle, and reveal the variance and contingency of ‘the system’” (p. 453). This idea is evident in Cherryholmes’ (1982) writings discussing the interplay of knowledge and power. My desire to understand the ins and outs of administration and teachers’ rights according to state and federal school law led me to obtain an M.A. in Leadership Studies as well as a principal’s certification.

Instead of returning to teach at the public school level after completing the program, I chose to pursue this doctorate with the goal of becoming a teacher educator and helping teachers understand and overcome the types of challenges they will face in the school system.

# Collaborative Experiences

*CARVE YOUR NAME ON HEARTS, NOT ON MARBLE.*

Fred B. Barker

Collaboration with others has been one of the most rewarding aspects of the doctoral program. My induction to the collaborative atmosphere here was immediate. Upon being hired as a graduate assistant, I was drafted to serve on the Student/Faculty Doctoral Seminar Committee. Being involved with four seminars in roles ranging from committee member to committee chair helped me learn how the doctoral program is organized and become familiar with the requirements and process from beginning to end while having the opportunity to interact with professors and classmates. My responsibilities included coming up with the types of sessions, contacting students and professors, and organizing. When questions arose about whether or not the seminar should be held only once a year, I was involved in the decision making process, offering student opinions and views regarding the pros and cons of a single seminar.

The entire concept of the seminar centers on collaboration and an effective chair must be a leader willing to take responsibility and delegate tasks. My background in Leadership Studies was instrumental in my success. Serving as committee chair, gave me the opportunity to put the theory of servant leadership into practice. The concept of servant leadership was introduced by Robert K. Greenleaf in the 1970’s. Servant leaders utilize their position to serve others, make meeting others’ needs the priority, are consistent, do not draw attention to themselves, are true to their word, dedicated to the cause, work to build trust and positive relationships, serve others and practice accountability.

Constant communication with the committee members and faculty is a must. A shared folder in Dropbox was used to keep all our information up to date and included a working draft of the seminar matrix, a job list for people to sign up to help, the checklist we follow when planning the seminar and information on the lunch menu. The use of technology was instrumental in keeping things organized and really helped facilitate collaboration.

Opportunities for collaboration are weaved throughout the doctoral coursework and have helped me realize that collaboration is necessary and has positive outcomes, but it is not always easy. Working as a team means making sacrifices for the greater good and overlooking differences. According to Sergiovanni (2004), collaboration creates a strong bond and commitment toward shared goals and purposes.

In the summer of 2011, Dr. Childress presented me with an opportunity to work collaboratively with my peers, Jake Bolen and Elbert Davis, to conduct research, write an article for publication and present our findings at the 2011 Southern Regional Council of Educational Administration Conference in St. Louis, MO. For this project, we worked with an Improving Teacher Quality Grant survey and data. We divided the work equally based on our personal strengths, with mine being writing concisely and organizing ideas. We presented at the conference in November 2011 and submitted our paper for publication in the SRCEA Yearbook. After many revisions made under the guidance of Dr. Childress, we received the bound copy of our work in September 2012. This project provided experience researching, writing for publication, and presenting. What a huge accomplishment brought about through collaboration with my peers. I am very proud to be the co-author of a research article. My personal experiences with collaborative efforts have taught me that we accomplish more together than we ever can alone; a valuable lesson that can be applied to so many aspects of life.

Prior to my experience in the doctoral program, my collaborative experiences on the professional level had been unpleasant, and I was hesitant to engage in collaborative activities. While I believed that collaboration could lead to positive effects, and the knowledge of many individuals put together was more useful than doing things alone, my peers were often older than me and did not include me, or failed to value my contributions due to our age difference. As a result of the collaboration experienced through the doctoral program I am now familiar with what true collaboration is as well as its value. Professionally, I plan to initiate collaborative experiences with my students in order to teach them what a proper collaborative environment should consist of in order to help them learn to work together and learn from and value each other’s contributions.

# Depth of Understanding: Curriculum & Instruction

*“FAITH IS A VISION OF THE HEART. IT SEES ‘GOD’ IN THE DARK AS IN THE DAY.”*

Fred B. Barker

## Personal Philosophy of Curriculum

When we think of curriculum and instruction, we tend to focus on the curriculum part, but we must not forget about instruction. The two are inherently dependent on one another. Experiences in this program have increased my knowledge in both areas. The process of completing CI 702 Curriculum Theory led me to refine and further develop my personal philosophy of curriculum.

Before beginning doctoral coursework, I did not have a personal philosophy of curriculum. In undergraduate school, I developed a philosophy of education, which loosely stated my beliefs about what education should provide for students. As a result of the curriculum theory course, I was able to really understand curriculum theory and theorists and come to identify with the phenomenological, gendered and post-structuralist perspectives. Phenomenology is the study of meaning and deals with an individual’s lived experiences within a context, and the meaning they draw from those experiences. Pinar et al (2004) refers to this as the essence of experiences. Teachers teach the way they do because of who they are. For example, Van Manen (2007) is concerned with the tone of teaching instead of standards and objectives, and stresses the importance of flexibility along with pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact as mindful skills. My personal take on this is that building meaningful relationships with students is vital to helping them learn. When teachers invest themselves in their students’ lives they develop an understanding of how individual experiences affect the manner in which students learn, and use them to help create meaning and bridge new and prior knowledge.

According to Noddings (1995), it is the teacher’s responsibility to foster authentic, caring relationships with students and teach them social responsibility by including themes of care in the curriculum. Honoring all professions was an essential component of Noddings’ idea of an ideal curriculum. Honoring all representations of gender and teaching students to respect diversity could be added to this concept, as Noddings also believes that differences should be celebrated. Feminist pedagogy addresses all oppressed individuals and marginalized groups, and stresses that knowledge is power and can be used to help citizens act on their environment to facilitate positive changes.

Building relationships and providing a safe, caring space for learning is the first step to helping students succeed. Once they know they are safe and can open up, then we as teachers can provide them with the knowledge they need to empower them to change their circumstances. Within my own classroom, I strive to hear and value all voices equally, build a culture of caring and tradition where students can work collaboratively with me and each other in order to reach a point of positive self-expression through the arts. For these reasons I identify strongly with the phenomenological and gendered traditions.

The positive side of the postructuralist tradition is embodied by the work of theorists like Cherryholmes, Doll, Lather and McLaren. This positive position echoes many of the beliefs of phenomenological and gendered traditions that are reflected in my own personal theory of curriculum, including a respect for diversity, hearing all voices, empowerment through education and student teacher collaboration. Like McLaren (2011), I believe providing individuals with an education that combines these factors can help students rise above their circumstances. Post-structuralists, including myself, believe that we must repudiate, dismantle, and reveal the variance and contingency of the system. Each of us views life through different lenses. How we ‘see’ things depends on many factors, including our education and lived experiences. My personal experience with the negative side of the system contributed to my desire to earn a doctoral degree. I do not wish to discourage teachers, only to inform them of the reality of the system and help them understand that to be a good teacher it is necessary to have courage and the ability to stand up for what is right.

## Area of Emphasis and the Curriculum

Technology was an area that was interesting but unfamiliar, which led me to choose Educational Computing as my area of emphasis (AOE). CIEC 700 Technology and Curriculum with Dr. Heaton was my first AOE course. The idea of learning how to really implement technology in the classroom was very exciting due to having little prior experience because of a lack of resources in rural public schools. One of the main concepts covered by the course was the digital divide which is the gap between individuals who have regular access to information and communication technology (ICT) and those individuals who do not (Ellis-Christensen, 2003-2011). My final project in the course involved researching the digital divide and how it affects West Virginia’s educational system, economy, and the population in general. This research was a real eye opener and gave me a good grasp of why integrating technology into West Virginia schools can be difficult, including limited broadband access and lack of funding.

This course also gave me some qualitative research experience and changed my point of view about video games and how they can be used to supplement and enhance the educational process. The combination of Gee’s (2007) book and the related research project changed my mind about gaming. Prior to completing this course, I viewed gaming as a waste of time. After reading Gee’s, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*, I conducted an interview with a gamer and then related the information to Gee’s 36 Learning Principles. For example, Gee’s principle 27, Explicit Information On-Demand and Just in Time explains that when gamers, or students, are provided with information on demand, or just when they need to use it, teaches them to problem solve and think critically within a given context. The Net Generation (Tapscott, 2009) does learn differently, and children today are more immersed in technology than ever before. This change of opinion was a big step in my personal development as an educator and changed my views regarding how technology can be used to enhance learning.

Another AOE course that had an impact on furthering my development as a professional educator was CIEC 715 Online Course Development and Delivery, also taught by Dr. Heaton. This course taught me how to design online courses using Blackboard. The course also helped me learn how to create and manage content within the online courses I teach and led to an additional opportunity to develop a module on cloud computing for an actual professional development course to be offered to West Virginia teachers. The opportunity to learn these skills enhanced my knowledge and helped me become a better designer and teacher of online courses as well as giving me a new marketable skill. My experiences in and related to this course helped me discover that I really enjoy the course building element of online teaching.

In addition to coursework, my technology skills have increased through learning by doing. Teaching and managing online courses have helped me hone my skills in those areas, and constant practice keeps my skills sharp. Working as a graduate assistant has given me more practice with programs like Microsoft Excel, PowerPoint and Word, and SPSS. My knowledge of cloud computing programs like Dropbox has also greatly increased, and I utilize these skills when teaching, serving as the doctoral seminar chairperson and in my day to day work for professors.

Response systems, which allow educators to gain interactive feedback by checking understanding during a lesson, were also new to me before beginning the program. According to d’Inverno, Davis and White (2003) students today are active learners, and when not offered opportunities for engagement, can acquire a passive mentality. Using response systems to check for understanding can help students stay more engaged as well as give them a moment to refocus. Jake Bolen and I created a presentation for the faculty Technology Users Group (TUG) to teach them about Poll Everywhere, a web based cell phone response system. The development of this presentation helped familiarize me with response systems and, in addition to the TUG presentation, we also presented the information in lesson format to students in two sections of CIEC 700. This was an exciting opportunity and it was great to be back teaching in a live classroom.

Another technological tool I learned about through coursework in CIEC 699 Final Project in Educational Computing was Portaportal. Portaportal is an online portfolio development tool. In order to gather information about the types and pros and cons of electronic portfolios being used in the program, I completed online research and interviewed students who had recently completed their portfolios. The sample included those who used electronic portfolios as well as traditional binder type portfolios. My findings led me to choose Portaportal and create my own Portaportal account which I used as the format for my doctoral program portfolio. Sharing this knowledge with fellow students was very rewarding and some of them are using the program for their portfolios. Upon completion of the doctoral program, my plan is to keep my Portaportal account active and continue to add and change the artifacts in order to maintain a working professional portfolio.

My competence in the area of Educational Computing has greatly increased as a result of my coursework and experiences as a graduate assistant. Overall, I have learned more about integrating technology into teaching and learning in the past two years than in the rest of my combined educational experience. Instead of being intimidated by technology, I now find it exciting and embrace the opportunity to learn more when possible. For me, this is a personal as well as professional breakthrough.

# Scholarship

*“PURPOSES, LIKE EGGS, UNLESS THEY BE HATCHED INTO ACTION, WILL RUN INTO DECAY.”*

Fred B. Barker

Reflecting on the quote above, it seems as though Papaw was saying: “Use what you know.” My time in the doctoral program has not only provided me with new knowledge, but also ample opportunities to use and share that knowledge through presentations, written publications, teaching, and course development. My first opportunity to present at a national conference was tied to the paper that Elbert, Jake, and I collaborated on and had published. We presented our findings at the Southern Regional Council of Educational Administration Conference (SRCEA). Our presentation centered on how administrators could utilize a theory based model for professional development to prepare teachers for the new National Common Core State Standards. Overall this experience provided the opportunity to collaborate with peers, publish a research article, and present at a national conference. This experience also served as an introduction to the process of writing for publication and taught me that different publications have different requirements and that writing and revising a work for publication takes much time and careful work. In addition, I was able to interact with the editors of the SRCEA yearbook and learned to interpret and use feedback from an outside source to improve my writing.

Presenting at a national conference was a new experience and helped prepare me for my next scholarly opportunity, submitting a qualitative research paper and presenting at the international EdMedia Conference in Denver, CO. The paper was titled “What’s Up with the World of WarCraft’, and was based on my research about gaming and education in CIEC 700. Dr. Heaton selected a group from the class to present individual findings as a panel at the conference. The session was full of attendees and the audience response was positive. After we each took a turn presenting our individual findings, we took questions with each of us contributing to the discussion regarding the value of video games and technology and how they can be used to supplement and enhance teaching and learning. Prior to this trip I had never flown on an airplane, took public city transportation or been to a city as large and diverse as Denver. The program has provided me the opportunities for many ‘firsts’ and helped me grow as a person and professional.

One of my main goals is to teach at the college level and the doctoral program and my position as graduate assistant have given me that opportunity. The first course I co-taught with Dr. Skoretz was a professional development course, CI 560 Family Involvement in Education. This course was offered to current teachers and designed to help them facilitate better communication and involvement with their students’ families. West Virginia Board of Education Policy 2200 (2008) stresses the importance of parent, family and community involvement in all levels of education. This type of involvement in education significantly contributes to improved student outcomes, helps facilitate a healthy education system and ensures quality education for all children. The course was online and gave me the opportunity to teach a higher level course as well as learn the ins and outs of Blackboard. During this course, I discovered that communicating with students through discussion and email can be an interactive, enjoyable experience and that my public school teaching experience helps me relate to students and offer advice and feedback based on my experience. A main premise of the gendered perspective of curriculum theory is providing a safe, caring space for learning. Facilitating communication through discussion and email helps me build meaningful relationships, a vital factor in student learning.

My second co-teaching experience involved CIEC 534 Applications Software in the Classroom with Dr. Heaton and Elbert Davis. CIEC 534 is a graduate level technology course and co-teaching provided an opportunity to interact with a group of students that includes pre-service and in-service teachers as well as those working toward special education and school counseling degrees while brushing up on technology skills that are a vital part of my AOE. The co-teaching experience was especially enjoyable because it gave me the opportunity to teach and interact with students in teacher education programs. After co-teaching with Dr. Heaton for one semester, she gave us our own section of the course to teach and we have taught the course every semester since. This experience, as well as my experience teaching at the middle school level, opened the door for me to teach CI 672 Practicum in Middle Education, providing yet another opportunity to work with teachers.

The skill set I have acquired as a result of these scholarly experiences has prepared me to teach and interact with students in teacher education programs. Presenting at and attending conferences will also be vital to my success as an education professor. Overall, these scholarly activities will enable me to reach my goal of becoming a teacher educator, which was my reason for enrolling in the doctoral program.

# Research

*“GOOD METHODOLOGY WILL TEACH YOU TO WIN TIME*.”

Fred B. Barker

Prior to enrolling in the doctoral program, my research experience was limited to a basic exposure from my Master’s coursework. This was soon to change. My first course was LS 703 Research Design with Dr. Childress. We were required to develop research questions and write a research proposal, which immediately got me thinking about my dissertation. LS 703 also helped familiarize me with writing a literature review and the concepts associated with qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research. There have been ample opportunities to conduct both qualitative and quantitative research and write about that research throughout the coursework. Three major projects, including the research for the EdMedia Conference paper and presentation, helped me hone my qualitative research techniques. These enhanced skills included writing interview questions, conducting interviews, and summarizing the interviews with observer comments in order to draw conclusions about emerging themes.

The other two projects emerged from courses with Dr. Debela. The first was pivotal as the idea for my dissertation emerged. The paper examined the effect of age related factors such as motivation, attitude, age of children at home, experience, and financial assistance on graduate level students’ academic performance and successful completion of a graduate degree. The paper also examined how we can reduce age discrimination and increase academic success for all students. Completing this study involved reviewing existing literature in order to come to conclusions.

The second paper, *Growing Up Bi-Racial in Rural West Virginia in the 1960’s and 1970’s*, provided the opportunity to develop research questions and conduct an interview. I interviewed a bi-racial female who came from a large, poor family and grew up in rural West Virginia in the 1960’s and 1970’s. The information I gained from the interview helped me come to a better understanding of the types of experiences minorities faced in school and day to day life during this time in history. In addition, I came to understand how individuals from this particular demographic viewed major events such as the Civil Rights Movement, and the effect such events had on their day to day lives. This project was also extremely valuable as the proposal had to be reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), a process that will be integral to my dissertation research.

The collaborative paper completed with Jake Bolen and Elbert Davis was my first experience with designing a survey, analyzing and interpreting data in order to reach a conclusion and then sharing the findings. My ability to do this came as a result of quantitative research coursework including EDF 711Survey Research with Dr. Childress, EDF 517 Statistical Analysis with Dr. Meisel, and LS 776 Advanced Quantitative Research with Dr. Securro. Survey Research provided experience developing survey questions, Statistical Analysis helped me understand the different types of statistical tests and ways to interpret statistical data, and Advanced Quantitative Research helped develop the skills necessary to use SPSS to analyze quantitative data. Maintaining an SPSS database for student dispositional data for Dr. Childress has also provided me with an opportunity to practice these skills.

# Conclusion

*“HAPPINESS IS NEVER PERFECT UNTIL IT IS SHARED.”*

Fred B. Barker

In my opinion knowledge is like happiness and it is meant to be shared. When my Papaw said “When you change your name, remain the same”, he was referring to marriage, but I believe the statement can be applied from an educational standpoint as well. No matter how far you go, never forget where you came from, someone is where you once were and it is your responsibility to guide them forward as others guided you. Never stop learning and always be willing to share your knowledge; the result will be happiness and fulfillment.

My experiences thus far in the program, including collaboration, the development of my personal curriculum theory, and scholarly activities such as teaching, writing, presenting and publishing have prepared me for the composition of the final document and the dissertation defense. The combination of both qualitative and quantitative research experiences, including the ability to review the literature, write research questions, design surveys and interview questions, and analyze and interpret data have provided the skill set necessary to successfully complete the research portion of my dissertation. Therefore, I feel confident beginning the dissertation process, and am ready and excited to move forward to the next part of my educational journey.

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