The Next Logical Step:

A Reflection

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## Introduction

I entered the curriculum and instruction doctoral program to explore opportunities to improve my professional practice while earning a doctoral degree. With the guidance of the doctoral faculty, the program has presented many challenges which allowed me to sharpen my skills while learning new knowledge and understandings of the peculiar world of education.

Reflecting on these experiences, I recall how the complexities of curriculum and instruction unfolded. During each meeting of the cohort, we explored curriculum and learning theories, discussed historical views of administrative and ethical theory, examined the nature of politics and education, and learned the foundations of solid research practice while building relationships with eighteen people who have facilitated my learning. These coursework experiences have allowed me to gain understanding of curriculum and instructional practices. While recently completing Dr. Childress’ course on Program Evaluation, I encountered the helpful tool of the logic model. When organizing this paper, I developed a logic model (Attachment 1) which will provide a framework for describing and reflecting on my process through the doctoral program.

A logic model displays a graphic representation demonstrating linkages within a particular concept or process. The model commences with the recognition of resources or inputs (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). The second component is comprised of the activities or interventions that occur to attain the short and long term impact. Lastly, short term and long term impact resulting from the interventions is identified. For this purpose, short term impact is descriptive of where I am in the doctoral process. Long term alludes to the outcomes at completion of the doctoral program.

## Resources

The logic model begins with the identification of resources available to support and facilitate my doctoral program experience. Personal resources with which I began this journey included the love of learning, the motivation to earn this degree, and the perseverance to continually put forth the time and effort needed to complete program requirements. Professional experience serving students at the secondary, middle, and elementary levels has also been a valuable attribute.

Colleagues and cohort members have also served as indispensable resources. Both groups, the West Virginia Department of Education Response to Intervention (RTI) Specialists and cohort members, have banded together providing support and encouragement. Both groups demonstrate the belief that success for one member is success for all. As a result, I have come to depend upon the digital correspondence through email, discussion boards, and monthly face to face visits. Each group has become like a family member to which I can turn to for advice, expertise, insight and encouragement. Other colleagues also lend support, guidance, and encouragement and empathy, as three of them have pursued a doctorate.

Lastly, the pursuit of this degree would not be possible without the support and sacrifice of my family members. My husband and son have both given up countless hours of my attention as evenings and weekends have been consumed by reading, writing and completing projects. Family vacations have been placed on hiatus as well until this endeavor’s fiscal and time demands have passed. Their willingness to sacrifice has been a constant motivation to persevere and continue pursuit of the degree.

## Activities/Interventions

The second component of a logic model consists of the activities and interventions experienced to attain the short term and long term impact. Activities and interventions are the processes, techniques, events and actions that comprise the program’s designated activities (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004). These activities and interventions are the catalysts for my growth as a doctoral student. In addressing these interventions within the logic model, I am organizing them into the following categories: Coursework, Portfolio Development, Collaborative Activities, Doctoral Seminar, and the Cohort Experience.

### Coursework

#### Foundations and Research

Participation in scholarly activities required immersion in activities that allow application of the research knowledge and skills learned through my course work. The first course I took which allowed this was Research Design with Dr. Eagle and Dr. Childress. In this course I examined completed dissertations and was then required to develop a research proposal. I felt overwhelmed when trying to formulate my research questions. I would submit a possible question, but upon feedback from Dr. Eagle, would refine the question multiple times. Through this process I developed an understanding of the importance of having well developed research questions that are clearly stated when developing a research proposal. At the conclusion of this class, I knew that the research process can be very time consuming and is also comprised of much revision.

I had the opportunity to apply research and writing skills gained through coursework in my professional practice. In the Writing for Publication course with Dr. Simone, I was able to mesh the topic of Response to Intervention (RTI) with my course assignment. While completing the assignment of writing an article suitable for publication, I was able to detail the West Virginia plan for supporting schools in their effort to scale-up RTI implementation statewide. The process required many revisions and many opportunities for peer editing. I have learned not only what a quality piece of writing should look like, but also the amount of effort and time required to compose a high quality piece of writing. This was reinforced in other courses as Dr. Toth and Dr. Anderson required students to also draft a manuscript suitable for publication as a course requirement. These experiences with writing and revision facilitated growth in confidence about my writing abilities. After experiencing Dr. Simone’s course, I believe I would enjoy writing in the future when I will be able to dedicate more time to the task. Furthermore, through submission and rejection of the manuscripts for publication, I learned about how difficult it is to become published in a scholarly journal.

Dr. Meisel’s Statistical Methods course supported my understanding of the time that the research process can take. A great amount of time was used in manually calculating formulas to analyze data. This was followed by proving the calculations electronically. In this course, Dr. Meisel eloquently taught me to read and understand the statistical portion of research articles. I developed a basic understanding of types of data that can be analyzed, as well as what types of statistical analysis best matches a particular type of data.

When thinking about research, I often considered quantitative methods equated with surveys, data collection and calculations. Dr. Debela’s Qualitative Research in Education course allowed me to develop an appreciation of the value of personal interviews and observations in a research project. A requirement to develop a short study involving interview protocols and submit an IRB proposal allowed me to gain an understanding of the challenges associated with qualitative research methods and the IRB process. As a researcher, I would be comfortable conducting observations, interviews, writing field notes, and be able to use qualitative research in developing a readable and meaningful report. I now understand that a mixed methods approach is a viable option for many research studies, including a dissertation.

In the Survey Research course with Dr. Childress, I worked to develop a survey instrument designed to determine current levels of implementation of the Response to Intervention (RTI) framework in West Virginia middle schools. Data were gathered and analyzed collaboratively with Lanai Jennings and Dr. Childress. Information gathered though this survey was used by eight RTI specialists to focus the scope of their work for the fall of 2009. Developing the survey required revision and collaboration from a group of peers in order to validate the survey. Through this process, I acquired a basic ability to use the SPSS software, along with an understanding of how to report results to others in a clear and concise manner. The team of RTI specialists drew conclusions from these data to make professional decisions regarding support for middle schools in the process of implementing RTI.

#### Curriculum and Instruction

Through coursework relating to curriculum and instruction, I have gained a broader understanding of curriculum theories, learning theories, and educating students in a multicultural setting. While I had a basic understanding of Behaviorism, Humanism, and Constructivism after completing my bachelor’s degree, these graduate level courses allowed me to deepen my knowledge of the theories by reciprocal teaching with my classmates.

Through the curriculum and instruction coursework with Dr. Murphy and Dr. Meyer, I became knowledgeable about curriculum development and the contributions of curriculum thinkers such as Ralph Tyler and John Dewey. The study of the historical contexts of schooling and curriculum development has been influential in my understanding of the role of modern education. I now tend to examine situations through a constructivist lens shadowed with the reality of brain based learning. Furthermore, much of the professional development I deliver to teachers is influenced by the constructivist learning theory as I am often asking teachers to create new knowledge regarding their learning based upon what they are presently doing in their classrooms.

Dr. Meyer exposed me to the work of Langeveld, Dewey, Pinar, and Grumet as well as Currere, Child Development theory, Constructivism, and Situated Learning. Through exploring these theories and theorists, I have gained a deeper understanding of the challenges I faced while teaching at the middle level. While working at the elementary level, many school-wide practices were of a behaviorist nature. The discipline plans, grading system, and classroom operations were all based upon rewards and punishments. As explained by Joyce, Weil, & Calhoun (2009), teaching methods employed with behaviorism included memorization, presentation, and direct instruction. I did not have a problem operating in this system with such young learners. It was the operating protocol for the school, and I adapted to the systems that were in place, a process Joyce (2009) describes as acculturation. It was easy to practice the processes already in place.

However, as I accepted new employment working with middle school students, my thoughts about curriculum and learning were different. Processes already in place were not visible, and I attempted to implement my personal preferences. At this age, I had the expectation that students should be able to use experiences and become active learners building knowledge based upon previous learning. The students were not accustomed to learning in a constructivist manner, resulting in frustration for me as a teacher. After two years, I left teaching in middle school.

Having studied the constructivist learning theory, my beliefs about student learning were validated. I understand that my preferred teaching style is constructivist. Learning should result from the construction of knowledge. A teacher should scaffold students learning as they construct meaning from their environment though intellectual, social, and personal relationships (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995). Students create understanding through talking, creating and questioning each other, as well as the teacher.

Program Evaluation with Dr. Childress taught me how to conduct a program evaluation using a logic model as the foundation. In this course, I used the logic model to design an evaluation of the technical assistance model used by RESA4’s Technical Assistance Group (TAG). Having an understanding of the logic model has allowed me to be an active participant in a professional setting, as the logic model was used as a basis for structuring the annual federal reporting that is required for the Office of Special Programs.

#### Leadership Studies

Through Dr. Toth’s course, Principles of Leadership, I developed the understanding that efficient leadership serves as a model of appropriate actions and a motivator for the audience’s actions. This course caused me to realize that as a leader during a transformational time in education, I must develop an atmosphere that will allow individuals to recognize goals and take action, while modeling appropriate interactions through a position of trust. I must intertwine this trust, influence, effective communication, and reflection, and in the end, convert a vision into reality. Reflecting upon this course allowed me to examine how the doctoral experience and professional practice have become interspersed. I have developed the trust of the district leaders with which I have been assigned to work. Through effective communication and influence, the districts are translating their vision of RTI implementation in their schools into reality.

School District Leadership with Dr. Kolsun allowed me to develop an understanding of the role of a school system at the district level. While I took this course in tandem with the Superintendency, the combination allowed me to develop an understanding of the multiplicity of duties that a superintendent must fulfill while leading a district. Examining this role made me appreciate that my present employment allows me to be able to focus efforts on one initiative affecting public schools.

Adult and Continuing Education with Dr. Watts also facilitated my deeper understanding of schools, school districts, and school related agencies. Through this course, we examined the adult learner and the roles of career technical centers, community and technical colleges, and regional educational service agencies. Not only do I now have an understanding of adult learners’ needs relating to time schedules and delivery options, but I am knowledgeable about the numerous options available in nearly every county in West Virginia. Understanding adult learners’ needs is a concept that influences my job as a professional developer. Contributing to the design and delivery of professional development at the state and RESA levels requires an understanding of the exceptional needs of the adult learner.

Politics in Education with Dr. Galbraith allowed me to develop a more positive view of politics. Previously, I had negative thoughts about politics, believing only bad things result from these relationships. Now, I realize that politics is an integral part of any institution, and one must understand this in order to achieve goals and accomplish change, good or bad.

Public School Law with Dr. Harris-John provided a historical perspective of the American legal system as it pertains to public education. This course deepened my understanding of students’ rights relating to education. Furthermore, it made me apprehensive about considering administrative positions in education.

### Portfolio Development

With the support of Dr. Childress and Dr. Heaton, Peggy Sue Crowe and I co-taught an on-line course, Trends and Issues in Education. A majority of the course was previously designed, but we were responsible for developing one additional module as well as verifying the previous modules matched the readings in the revised textbook.

During the course, I discovered the course’s success is based upon preparation. A vast amount of work goes into course development long before the semester begins. By reading the text, course discussions, and writing assignments, I extended my knowledge of the topics. When reviewing writing assignments, I was surprised at the level of work some students submitted. Their lack of attention to using APA style made me more conscious of my work as a student. I considered the course a success. The student evaluations of the course provided positive feedback with zero responses disputing the positively phrased statements. Written comments were also positive. Through this process, I have increased my knowledge of methods to provide relevant assignments and interact with adult students to keep online instruction productive, engaging, reflective and interactive. I enjoyed immensely the online component. Learning to manipulate the blackboard software from the instructor view was an enjoyable task.

### Collaborative Activities

Through participation with Dr. Watts, I learned the processes and requirements for preparing and presenting at regional and national conferences. A study of the pre-school collaborative efforts in Lincoln County was conducted together with Tina Lou Edwards and Peggy Sue Crowe. Through this process, I was afforded the opportunity to learn the intricacies of pre-school collaboration between local head start organizations and local boards of education. We worked together to formulate a survey, collect and analyze data, and develop a manuscript for submission for publication to the Southern Regional Council for Education Administrators (SRCEA). Results from the study were also developed into a presentation for the National SRCEA conference and the statewide conference of the West Virginia Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (WVASCD). Developing and conducting the study, and examining and reporting the results allowed me to be immersed in research and writing activities similar to the dissertation process.

Although nervous during the first presentation, I developed the confidence necessary for public speaking and was able to relax more during the second delivery of the presentation. Surprisingly, a few short months later, I found myself delivering a work related presentation on a different topic in the same facility. This experience allowed me to complete this task in a relaxed manner.

### Doctoral Seminar

Another opportunity for professional and academic growth has been my participation in planning the 2009 doctoral seminars. The seminar committee demonstrated a real world example of collaborative leadership. Melanie White was the chairman, who facilitated discussion among committee members to set the direction of the seminar. Committee members stepped forward, accepted responsibility and kept processes moving toward completion. As a member of the planning committee, I participated by managing the registration table, arranging for lunch delivery and distribution, facilitating a session, and co-coordinating the gift committee. The seminar was a success due to the collaborative effort of the committee members.

I learned a great deal about collaboration and organization on a greater scale. With a collaborative project, planning requires a time commitment from all members, paired with the use of an efficient mechanism for communication. Simple decisions such as what is served for lunch can be drawn out and consume great amounts of time. I discovered how critical it is to meet deadlines when working on a committee. If one member did not meet a deadline, it caused a ripple effect with responsibilities of other members. After seeing firsthand what an undertaking it is to organize and deliver a great seminar, I was willing to help again as a volunteer to support the fall seminar committee.

### The Cohort Experience

The pinnacle of collaborative activities would be participation in the cohort. Through the entire coursework experience, collaboration has been at the center of each class. Networking and developing professional relationships with others from across the state, with positions different than mine, has been an opportunity for growth that I would have not experienced otherwise. There have been many collaborative assignments throughout the courses, including group presentations, discussion groups and collaborative final exams. One advantage of the cohort was that personal relationships were already established, and we could quickly concentrate on the learning tasks at hand. These experiences have allowed me to refine leadership skills when in a situation to lead, but also cultivate teamwork skills when the role required following a colleague as part of the team.

## Short Term Impact

Specific changes in attitudes, behaviors, knowledge, and skills that come from program activities or interventions are short-term impact (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004). Through my doctoral work, I have grown both as a student and educator in the roles of researcher, writer, scholar, and leader. I have increased content knowledge in the areas of curriculum and instruction, leadership, the research process, and collaboration. In several courses I was able to blend academic assignments with professional practice to make the learning truly authentic. Furthermore, in professional practice I have the opportunity to work closely with county leaders who demonstrate contextual, collaborative, and authoritarian leadership in day to day operations of a school district. These skills and new found confidence will provide a foundation as I continue to apply newly acquired skills in doctoral work and professional practice.

## Long Term Impact

Long term changes in knowledge, skills, attitudes, and expertise serve as the most significant component of the logic model (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). I have applied what I have learned about curriculum to my work as a professional developer with teachers, and applied what I learned about leadership when working with district administration. All counties in my district have implemented RTI at the elementary level and are exploring how the framework can support instruction at the middle level. The doctoral program is broadening my view of education, and compelling me to become more critical of my instructional practices as well as others.

## Next Steps

In reflecting on my experiences with the doctoral program, I have gained the confidence to take on new challenges which will allow me to continue to grow as a researcher and scholar in the area of curriculum and instruction. As learned while studying the Autobiographical Theory with Dr. Meyer, one is always circling back over the past, bringing the past into the present, and heading out into the future (Carlson, 2005). This reflection serves this purpose, bridging past coursework, present professional practice, and the future endeavor of a dissertation.

New perspectives have evolved resulting from the blending the curriculum and instruction courses, educational foundation, and research courses over the last three years. Looking back on the knowledge gained through my coursework in curriculum and instruction, leadership, and educational foundations, my perspective about education has clearly become broader and better articulated. I have explored the research process and written clear, precise research questions based on a problem statement in Research Design, I have explored survey methods, practiced data collection and drawing conclusions in Survey Research, practiced interview and observation tactics in Qualitative Research, synthesized literature in Program Evaluation, and practiced the writing process in nearly every course, but most extensively in Writing for Publication and Institutional Advancement. Clearly, I am ready to attempt a major research project. While I have not selected a particular topic for a dissertation, it was evident during Dr. Childress’ Program Evaluation course when I reviewed available literature on the evaluation of RTI programs that further research needs to be conducted regarding the implementation of RTI and its components.

As I progress to the dissertation stage of this endeavor, I am a bit nervous about the monumental size of the project, but confident that I have the skills and knowledge to complete a large, independent research project. Through this process, I learned that one does not achieve great success without collaboration from others. I am confident that I can make a meaningful contribution with the guidance and support of my committee.

Attachment 1

Framework for Personal Reflection

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Resources | Activities | Short Term Impact | Long Term Impact |
| * Commitment to lifelong learning * Personal motivation * Diverse professional background * Time and effort * MUGC Faculty/Staff * Colleagues * Cohort members * Family members * Financial Support | * Coursework * Portfolio Development * Collaborative Activities * Doc Seminar * Cohort * Dissertation Process | * Increased content knowledge   + Curriculum & Instruction   + Leadership * Increased understanding of the research process * Enhanced leadership and collaborative skills | * Greater professional productivity and accomplishment * New career direction and opportunities |

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