

Challenging Simplistic Beliefs About Curriculum

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Six simplistic beliefs about curriculum are challenged by these writers. "Scientific developments in the field of curriculum must be melded into a meaningful whole with the humanistic endeavors in the field."

Curriculum is a vast subject, and there is no intent by us to completely define its parameters and the complexities involved. The purpose of this article is to challenge what we believe are some simplistic notions about curriculum and to help extend the concept of curriculum. During these times of "accountability," constant demands for "competence," and cries for "objective" evidence, educators at all levels who are concerned with curriculum must know how their beliefs and conceptions affect practices in curriculum.

Current Simplistic Beliefs That Affect Curriculum Practice

We believe there are some simplistic beliefs held today that directly affect current practices in curriculum. In our opinion, these need to be carefully examined and modified if we are to operate from a comprehensive concept of curriculum. Among these beliefs are:

1. Competencies needed by adults can be identified, adequately defined, and predicted as future needs, and curricula can be built so that students will attain them.
2. Behavioral objectives can be precisely stated and objectively evaluated so that an accurate measure can be obtained of what has been learned. Standardized tests provide adequate forms of measurement that will document the real effect of curriculum.
3. Teachers should be held accountable for the learnings of their pupils.
4. The emphasis of the curriculum should be

on the basics. Frill subjects should become part of the learner's curriculum only when an acceptable level of competence in the basics has been met.

5. Curriculum development is a task that is completed when a committee has submitted a report, curriculum guide, or a set of instructional materials.

6. Everyone knows what is meant by the curriculum.

Some Challenges of Beliefs That Affect Practices

In an effort to challenge some of these more simplistic beliefs about curriculum and to encourage growth in current curriculum practices, we offer the following:

Identification, Definition, and Prediction of Competencies as the Curriculum. We doubt seriously that all the competencies needed by citizens of a pluralistic democracy and a complex global society can ever be adequately identified, defined, and predicted. Our world is changing rapidly and will continue to change for as far into the future as humans can see. A comprehensive curriculum does not provide the learner merely with an accumulation of skills and knowledge. It helps the learner develop more varied thought processes, new levels of awareness, new sensitivities, and new modes for expressing thoughts and emotions. It also offers the learner opportunities to experience satisfaction and frustration, knowns and mysteries, and acceptance and doubt.

As competency-based education now exists, it

reflects a narrow array of what humans need in order to function today within almost any group one might choose as a reference point. It is likely that the importance of being able to read labels on bottles, add columns of figures, and interpret written passages will continue as needed competencies for functioning in our sophisticated world. It is equally important to deal with change, to anticipate the future consequences of actions we take today, and to chart the paths we might take to build the future we desire. If we are going to have a comprehensive curriculum, these attributes must receive equal concern for and equal efforts toward development. We do not include these needed skills in any list of competencies today. Thus, we view competency-based education as it is now defined as a narrow segment of what the curriculum ought to include.

Behavioral Objectives and Precise Measurement. A comprehensive curriculum cannot be adequately built using only specific behavioral objectives that can be observed and measured. The exclusive use of specific behavioral objectives limits curriculum and instruction. They assist in achieving some outcomes of the curriculum very well, and this must be recognized. For example, skills in reading, such as phonetic analysis of words, and skills in math, such as computing in the four basic processes, are outcomes of the curriculum that may be served very well by specific behavioral objectives. In our judgment, other desirable outcomes are not. These include developing creativity, intuition, imagination, and risk-taking behaviors.

To base learning outcomes entirely upon that which is observable and measurable is to deny the complexity and unpredictability of the educational process. The importance of raising dissatisfaction and doubt within the learner, to encourage the possibilities of an unexpected adventure, and to search for the unknown must also be recognized and accepted. Learnings that have not been predetermined or stated specifically, and that are immeasurable, are equally worthwhile. We believe that both the "unintended" and "unspecified" outcomes must receive attention as well as outcomes that can be specifically stated and measured. We believe that a skillful facilitator (teacher) will encourage learners to strike out toward objectives that may not have been predetermined, but that

may have more value for the learner than those that were.

The exclusive use of standardized tests also severely restricts curriculum practice. Standardized test scores may yield important data about some aspects of curriculum, but they will not adequately evaluate a comprehensive curriculum. What can be measured does not represent the entire array of desired outcomes from the curriculum. Some of the outcomes we hope for cannot be adequately measured now by tests, and perhaps never will be. Many affective behaviors we hope will be developed, such as openness to new experiences and modes of thought, empathy for others, and skills in human relations, cannot be measured in the traditional standardized test format. Further, we may never determine very adequately the actual effects of the curriculum since each learner takes away his/her own unique experiences and meanings from the educative process. Perhaps this phenomenon of the "unique development" is the essence of curriculum. These effects may forever remain immeasurable outcomes of curriculum.

The Accountability of Teachers for Learning. Learning is a complex process that is not completely understood. Many factors affect what students learn at school, some of which are not within the control of the teacher. Hungry, abused, or neglected children will not learn as well as well-fed, well-loved, and cared-for children. Children who are not read to, not conversed with, and who remain in their own local environment will not learn as readily as children whose parents read to their children, communicate with their children, and help to expand their immediate environment. Many other examples could be given, but we hope our point is clear: to hold a teacher entirely accountable for the learning of the pupils in that classroom reflects a simplistic view of learning. It will also encourage simplistic curricular practice since teachers who are held accountable in this way will tend to emphasize the simpler tasks of learning. More complex and more important objectives of the curriculum will not receive deserved attention.

The Basics Must Be Learned Before the Frills Are Included. The problem with this belief is to adequately define the basics. Most people agree that communication skills are necessary for effective participation in our society. These skills are

usually defined as ability to read, write, and compute. Some research suggests that these skills are largely the curriculum for the primary grades.¹ When we follow this curricular practice, we must be aware of important omissions from the curriculum. Interpersonal skills, understandings about oneself and other people, determining a balanced relationship between the environment and human needs and desires, appreciation of people from other cultures and races, skills necessary to participate in a democratic form of government, and appreciation for all forms of human heritage and beauty are omitted or slighted because "the basics" consume schooltime for children. We believe that these are as basic to human development as communication skills and must receive equal consideration in the curriculum. If they are not, young people will have a lopsided education that teaches them in some areas and neglects other equally important areas.

The Task of Curriculum Development. The task of building a curriculum is continuous. Development of curricula does not cease with the report of a committee, the production of a course of study, or the purchase or creation of new materials for instruction. The concept of a viable curriculum requires continuing efforts for tasks in curriculum development, such as the refinement of objectives and the wise selection of learning materials. In addition, the impact of factors that are usually not considered as curriculum development tasks, such as the selection of personnel, the continuous need for the professional improvement of educational personnel, and the total administrative organization, act upon the curriculum and cause a need for constant reassessment and modification.

There is no such thing as the "finished curriculum." No curriculum is ever closed or complete. A curriculum should remain open-ended and flexible. It must be thought of as growing and evolving.

Everyone Knows What Curriculum Is. We believe that there are many definitions of curriculum and the one selected to guide practice is extremely important. To some, curriculum is a list of behavioral objectives, an outline of content, a course of study, or a test. Others accept a more carefully formulated definition of curriculum.

Macdonald, et al., for example, defines cur-

riculum as—"the cultural environment which has been purposively selected as a set of possibilities for facilitating educative transactions."² Beauchamp defines it as a written plan for directing teaching.³ Short and Marconnet define it as any experiences under the auspices of the school.⁴ Tyler, one of the most quoted authorities in curriculum, defines it in terms of four questions in one of the most basic works in curriculum.⁵ Hopkins defines the IS curriculum as—"what the teacher causes pupils to do themselves while they are associated together . . . what each pupil can take from the teacher-pupil relationship to help him or her better understand and develop the self"⁶

From these definitions of curriculum, it should be clear that there is not agreement on what curriculum is. It is important that this fact be recognized and that the concept of curriculum used to guide practice be made explicit. We believe the perspective from which curriculum is viewed helps to formulate the conception that is held about what curriculum is.

One comprehensive view of curriculum identifies five differing perspectives: What forefront thinkers concerned with curriculum believe it ought to be ideally in society has been called the *Ideal Curriculum*; expectations that groups and individuals want to impose upon the school has been called the *Formal Curriculum*; the curriculum the teacher believes he or she offers to the students is the *Instructional Curriculum*. What actually occurs in the classroom as determined

¹ John I. Goodlad, M. Frances Klein and Associates. *Looking Behind the Classroom Door*. Worthington, Ohio: Charles A. Jones Publishing Co., 1974.

² James B. MacDonald, Bernice J. Wolfson, and Esther Zaret. *Reschooling Society: A Conceptual Model*. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1973. p. 22.

³ George A. Beauchamp and Kathryn E. Beauchamp. *Comparative Analysis of Curriculum Systems*. Wilmette, Illinois: Kugg Press, 1972.

⁴ Edmund D. Short and George D. Marconnet. *Contemporary Thought on Public School Curriculum*. Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown, 1968.

⁵ Ralph W. Tyler. *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949.

⁶ L. Thomas Hopkins. "The WAS vs. IS Curriculum." *Educational Leadership* 34(3):213; December, 1976.

by trained observers is the *Operational Curriculum*, and what the students actually experience in the classroom is the *Experiential Curriculum*. Persons viewing curriculum from each of these perspectives will see it as something slightly different.⁷ A scholar in science, for example, will be mostly concerned with concepts and skills to be included; lay groups will be concerned with the information and skills that they expect the school to develop over time; teachers will be most concerned with the activities and materials to be presented in their classroom; and students will be most concerned with the daily experiences they are having at school. If observers were present in the classroom, the chances are they would see some of what each of these groups is interested in and other factors operating in the classroom as well. A comprehensive conception of curriculum will allow for all of these perspectives and provide for an effective integration of them.

Curriculum can also be conceptualized into certain separate components such as: (a) content, (b) teaching techniques and strategies, (c) learning opportunities, (d) scheduling, (e) curriculum materials/development, (f) teaching-learning processes, (g) objectives for the learner, (h) facilities, and (i) equipment. This design for the study of curriculum enables educators to separate the component parts of the curriculum conceptually for the purpose of examining them in order to understand their effect upon the totality of curriculum. In-depth study of any of these identifiable areas of curriculum permits the educator to dissect and probe ever more deeply into a fuller understanding of the concept of curriculum. The operational concept of curriculum needs to be wholistic, however. This concept requires that the curriculum developer and the implementor orchestrate all subsets of curriculum in such a way that each learner will have a rewarding educational experience.

There is no one accepted definition of curriculum by any group, and the one chosen to be followed or to serve as a guide for planning educational experiences can significantly affect what kind of curriculum will be in operation in a school and classroom. A curriculum modeled after Tyler's will be different from one modeled after Macdonald's definition. We believe there are strengths in all the above approaches, and an

exploration needs to be made of how the strengths from the various definitions, perspectives, and components can be blended into a comprehensive unified concept of curriculum that will direct practice.

No curriculum exists without action, interaction, and reaction. When some action, interaction, and reaction (AIR) takes place between the learner and some thing, or between the learner and another person's ideas, beliefs, and practices, the curriculum comes alive.⁸ When this occurs, we believe there is a comprehensive, wholistic curriculum in operation.

Summary and Challenge

Extensive efforts must be made to develop a comprehensive concept of curriculum. Simplistic notions of curriculum must be challenged. Scientific developments in the field of curriculum must be melded into a meaningful whole with the humanistic endeavors in the field. The major goal of curriculum should be to constantly strive to provide knowledge, understandings, attitudes, and sophisticated human skills that can help humankind guide scientific and materialistic developments as wisely as we possibly can. We must pursue all the means we have available to us in curriculum in order to achieve this goal. \square

⁷ John I. Goodlad and Associates. *Curriculum Inquiry: The Study of Curriculum Practice*. New York: McGraw-Hill, in press.

⁸ W. Paul Fischer. *Ask, Answer and Apply to Your Curriculum Needs*. Allentown: Schlecter, 1975. pp. 21, 25.



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