

Perspectives and Imperatives

THE ROLE OF CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS IN CURRICULUM INQUIRY: A HOLISTIC APPROACH

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In recent years, a considerable discussion about various paradigms of curriculum inquiry has ensued. Sometimes particular paradigms compete with each other, sometimes we assume that particular paradigms can and should peacefully coexist. For coherent curriculum inquiry, however, we need a holistic approach, embracing all that is well conceived in other proposed paradigms. This approach to curriculum manifestly exists and is associated with specific educators. But so far the approach has avoided formal classification, perhaps because its comprehensive nature differentiates it from other paradigms that can be readily classified by an unambiguous and distinctive methodology, focus of interest, or more generally, form.

Characteristic forms of inquiry—experimental, naturalistic, case-study, hermeneutical, or even analytic-philosophical—all concentrate on a particular type of question, a particular range of problems, or a particular mode of research.¹ Individual scholars committed to a given form of inquiry may or may not see that form as constituting only a legitimate part of curriculum inquiry as a whole. But whether they identify their perspective with curriculum inquiry as such or not, their research and theorizing proceed only in the context of their chosen paradigm. In contrast, the holistic approach views the curriculum field as a whole. Its premise is that most paradigms are partial, which is in itself a defect. It advocates a comprehensive approach and by clear implication regards other narrower conceptions of curriculum inquiry not so much as alternatives as misconceived. This approach is based on the belief that a proper grasp of the domain of curriculum reveals the need for integrating various disciplines and types of questions, as well as of theory and practice. If it has a specifically methodological point to make, it is that conceptual clarity is the backbone of any worthwhile research. More generally, it arises out of a philosophical perspective and sees a need to reemphasize and incorporate

¹Edmund C. Short, *Forms of Curriculum Inquiry: Guidelines for Conducting Educational Research* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

philosophy in other aspects of inquiry (rather than pursued as a distinctive type of inquiry by certain specialists only).

Despite the importance of conceptual analysis, we cannot satisfactorily describe the holistic approach to curriculum inquiry in terms of its methodology. The holistic approach holds that the methods of inquiry are necessarily many in curriculum. Do not confuse the holistic approach, however, with the common belief among curriculum theorists that we should allow or encourage many different methodologies on the same grounds John Stuart Mill used to defend freedom of speech—that only by tolerance of diversity will the truth be revealed and strengthened. That kind of liberalism, which the editorial policies of various curriculum journals constantly advertises, is not the immediate motive behind advocating a comprehensive approach. The argument for encouraging many modes of inquiry is rather that different questions, being of different kinds, require different kinds of treatment, and that therefore no curriculum specialist should become identified with a specific methodology, for that is tantamount to saying one is interested only in a specific type or limited range of questions. That limitation is unacceptable because we can properly understand the various types of curriculum questions only in relation to each other. Curriculum specialists concentrating exclusively on, say, analytic questions in the abstract or empirical research of a particular type do not merely have a limited field of interest; their vision of that field is distorted because they have no context and thus no criteria to assess the curricular value of what they are doing.

The holistic model therefore incorporates, in principle, all other forms of inquiry involving a specific methodology that is appropriate to a certain range of problems. It incorporates, for example, the techniques of analytic philosophy while embracing both ethnographic and systematic study. The holistic approach views the field of curriculum as a complex set of interrelated but unique kinds of questions, and consequently it argues that various different sorts of things need to be done. What makes the approach distinctive is its belief that every other form of inquiry offers at best a part of the whole and that the parts cannot legitimately be divorced. The whole arising out of the various other forms of inquiry is greater than the sum of the parts. The assumption is not the hardly contestable truth that some problems are best determined experimentally, others hermeneutically, still others analytically, nor even that particular problems often involve various distinct elements (e.g., an evaluative question as well as a means-end question). It is rather that all such distinct forms of inquiry must be pursued together, by people who understand them all, on the grounds that the question of what should be researched and by what means is essentially tied up with the conceptual framework of the business we are interested in. In other words, we are involved with more than simply research. We are involved with curriculum, as opposed to medical, pure science, philosophical, or any other kind of research.

The context does not merely delineate the area of our concerns; it gives us the central organizing concepts, from which we derive criteria to determine what is a truly curricular issue and from which we judge effective, worthwhile, or successful practice and research. By no accident, for example, research in mental health generally receives more circumspection than research in physical health; so long as the central concepts of mental health (not least the concept itself) remain so difficult to analyze, no one can conceivably be in a position to say that any particular treatment is effective or works. If there is no agreement on what counts as mental health, how does the researcher determine success?

The situation in curriculum, according to those who advocate a holistic approach, is comparable to, but much more confused, than that of mental health. Other forms of inquiry pursue a limited range of questions in one particular way, and so they have no mechanism for judging the curricular or educational relevance and quality of what they do. As John Wilson, an advocate of a comprehensive view, has said, much research in the curriculum field may technically be good, but it has nothing to do with education.² For example, curriculum change designed to lead to greater social mobility could be engineered. But by what right would so-called curriculum researchers be coming up with such ideas? School curriculums are not supposed to be designed to sort out class problems. (Or if some think they should be, we need to argue and settle the point before designing or carrying out any such curriculum.)

FOUR CHARACTERISTICS OF A HOLISTIC APPROACH

The holistic approach to curriculum has four essential characteristics: (1) the integration of questions about means and ends, (2) the use of many specific modes of inquiry, (3) the granting of logical priority and great practical weight to conceptual questions, and (4) the willingness to generate certain methodological (more generally, practical) prescriptions from purely conceptual first principles. The preoccupations particularly dear to those who practice a holistic approach therefore include considering the aim of education, exploring means-ends relationships, and discriminating among different kinds of questions while seeking the appropriate strategy for each distinct kind.

1. *Integrating questions about means and ends.* We cannot totally separate questions about means and ends, or method and aims, either logically or in practice, by assuming that means questions require empirical research and ends questions philosophical scrutiny, as almost always happens and as curriculum writers often explicitly endorse. The question of whether something is a good, successful, or effective means is always partly a question of

²John Wilson, *Preface to the Philosophy of Education* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979); John Wilson, *Fantasy and Common Sense in Education* (Oxford, England: Martin Robertson, 1981); John Wilson, *What Philosophy Can Do* (Basingstoke, England: Macmillan, 1986).

what it is supposed to be a means to. Therefore, we cannot intelligibly claim to have found evidence that x is an effective reading scheme, y an effective school, or z an effective teacher unless we have (a) explored and explained the concept of effective reading (effective school or teacher), or (b) taken and stated a view on the matter from some other authority, or (c) implicitly expounded this view through the tests or measures of success employed in the research program.

- a. Researchers have seldom taken the first route. As professional philosophers well know, wrestling with complex concepts can be a lifetime's work, and as empirical researchers well know, designing technically competent research and carrying it out takes a lot of time, money, and hard work. Neither group has any marked enthusiasm for devoting time to mastering a new line of business. If they did, a further step would be required: to show by reasoning that the concept of success elaborated was logically related to the means of assessing it.
- b. Often, researchers take this second route. Sometimes they simply quote somebody else's definition; sometimes they offer a brief working definition of their own. In either case, this option differs from the first: Stating a definition is not the same as giving a full account of it and providing some reason to adopt it. Thus the problem for many empirical researchers: They do not fully understand what analyzing a concept means. They confuse it with citing examples, giving a verbal definition, or describing symptoms. But it is none of those things. If I say an effective reader, aged 10, should be able to read *Winnie the Poob*, or is one who can read *Winnie the Poob* with enthusiasm and understanding, or is one who likes to read *Winnie the Poob*, I do not give a full account of what it is to read effectively. I merely hint at it, as if I were to say, "Well, a good marriage is like the Jones," or "A good marriage is one that involves love and friendship" or "one in which people stay married." In both cases, reading and marriage, the first attempt at definition merely throws out an example, which does not help explain why it is an example; the second attempt offers a definition that may be clear at the verbal level but reveals little about the concept or idea (because terms such as *understanding* and *love* are no clearer than the words they are used to define); and the third attempt merely points to one possible indicator of the thing in question. In practice, therefore, offering a brief definition has not helped readers or students of the research to understand fully how or why success is being interpreted in a certain way.
- c. In practice, the third option is most common. By studying the means used to assess success in the research, we can work out more or less what success means to the researcher. Often, however, the reconstruction reveals a banal and arguably non-educational, even anti-

educational, concept. Obviously, to establish that a particular program of research has an impoverished concept of educational success takes time because the matter is contentious. But that is the whole point: It is a contentious matter that is being ignored. If, for example, research into whether people are creative turns out to mean whether they can think of uses for old shoe boxes, into whether they are intelligent to mean whether they can score above the norms on tests of vocabulary and numeracy, and into whether a school is good to mean whether children are "creative" and "intelligent" thus defined, then we must question whether this understanding of successful schooling is a reasonable one. The holistic approach assumes that whether something is an effective means in education depends on what constitutes educational success. Therefore, curriculum research must link the examination of means and ends.

2. *Using many specific modes of inquiry.* The belief in the need for many specific modes of inquiry is not an empirical belief in the efficacy of variety. It, too, is based firmly on the logical point that different questions are often not merely about different subject matter but are different in kind, and this difference in kind demands a different kind of treatment to try and answer them. The most obvious difference is the one between empirical and conceptual questions—questions about the nature of knowledge, for example, as opposed to questions about what people know. But different logical questions and different empirical questions often also demand to be treated differently: Aesthetic and moral questions differ, but we can answer questions on what students know by means that will not readily reveal how students know what they know.

Precisely what distinctions we can and should make is a disputed issue and is not immediately to the point. The holistic approach, however, contends that a variety of research methods must constantly be at the disposal of the curriculum specialist because a variety of types of questions need to be answered. Researchers who concentrate on one methodology (even if they acknowledge the existence of others) are necessarily concentrating on a small part of the whole out of context (which is rather like concentrating on incision techniques without having an interest in other aspects of surgery), or else they are applying inappropriate techniques on a number of occasions. Thus, the issue is not, for example, whether ethnographic approaches are to be preferred over the methods of interaction analysis, but which parts of the complex whole of classroom life lend themselves to one kind of scrutiny and which another.

3. *Granting logical priority and great practical weight to conceptual questions.* This characteristic of the holistic approach arises out of the first two. The corollary of the first point is that, just as using particular means of research necessarily implies some ends rather than others, so adopting or

assuming specific aims or ends of curriculum to some extent dictates our research methodology. The fear is that, as things are, the tail too often wags the dog: Researchers commit themselves to methodologies before determining what they wish to research. But the conceptual questions about ends must come first. That they do so logically is beyond dispute—nothing can be said about a something, including how to research it, until the something is clearly characterized.

Curriculum researchers must therefore begin by articulating some clear concepts both of the general area of curriculum and of their particular programs of research. Rather than allowing vague and possibly incoherent or unconvincing concepts of worthwhile and successful curriculum—as well as of intelligence, creativity, or whatever the focal point of a research project may be—to emerge from a study of how the research has been conducted, we have to start by defining the central concepts. Then, in the light of those concepts, we have to define the particular objects of interest. A clear understanding of what curriculum is and what it is ideally supposed to achieve, combined with a well-articulated account of the particular concepts we are currently looking into (e.g., developing creativity) would to some extent dictate how research should be conducted.

4. *Generating certain methodological, or practical, prescriptions from purely conceptual first principles.* This fourth characteristic is a specific refinement of the third. Previous conceptual work is essential in determining appropriate methods of research, and this earlier work will often itself yield far more than researchers commonly suppose. Some researchers maintain that philosophical inquiry is not practical and that the work of, for example, James Gribble, Paul Hirst, or Israel Scheffler does not lead to specific prescriptions for curriculum.³ But that judgment is somewhat confused. First, much does follow for practice from this kind of conceptual work because it provides criteria for recognizing and understanding what is going on in practice and thus for evaluating it, which are two essentials of curriculum. Second, conceptual work sometimes yields specific methodological prescriptions. Third, in some instances this mode of inquiry may lead to no particular prescription because there is no particular prescription to be given, in that situation, many different practices might legitimately be engaged in.

Thus, assuming that, for example, we were familiar with Hirst's conceptions about the nature of knowledge and the nature of education and were convinced by his arguments, researchers and teachers alike would have to relate their methods to the criteria implicit in Hirst's characterization of the

³James Gribble, *Literary Education. A Reevaluation* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Paul H. Hirst, *Knowledge and the Curriculum* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974); Israel Scheffler, *Reason and Teaching* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973).

developed mind.⁴ Any research into effective curriculum would have to look out for and take account of students' increased capacity to distinguish logically between distinct kinds of questions. Teachers of science, for example, would have to teach in a certain kind of way—one that promotes understanding the nature of scientific inquiry rather than one that concentrates on inculcating a mass of formulae and findings. Nothing in Hirst's analysis determines whether, for example, we should teach the forms of knowledge as separate subjects or in an integrated fashion, possibly because they do not necessarily have to be taught in either way; it may not in fact much matter which way we adopt.⁵

Often, the criteria arrived at by a process of conceptual analysis do not lend themselves to straightforward observation.⁶ Far from being a weakness of the approach, this statement merely acknowledges a fact of life: Many, perhaps most, of the things that educators should be interested in are not straightforwardly observable but have to be discerned, if at all, by intuition or judgment. By and large, behaviorists, for example, who deny this fact do so not because they have established that behaviorism is an adequate philosophy but because, for practical methodological reasons, they are interested only in examining matters that can be studied behaviorally. Thus, their practice and their limited interest contribute to defining the business of education inappropriately.

Any approach that tries to get round this problem by concentrating only on what can be directly observed or by working with operational definitions that are couched in directly observable terms necessarily distorts reality. Some researchers assert that we could give a behavioral definition of 99 percent of the things that interest us, but that claim is highly misleading. We could give behavioral definitions of every word in our vocabulary, but we would then move away from and lose contact with many concepts. Most people's concept of love, for example, differs greatly from any concept that could be presented in purely behavioral terms. A behavioral definition of love may be something we can readily research, but it will have little or nothing to do with the love that people experience. In the same way, a holistic approach to curriculum suggests that much empirical research into, for example, intelligence, creativity, or successful education does not in fact look at what intelligence, creativity, and education truly are, conversely, curriculum research has to be prepared to rely on indirect assessments of whether the true criteria of intelligent behavior or understanding are being met.

⁴Paul H. Hirst, *Knowledge and the Curriculum* (Boston. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), pp. 34, 41–42.

⁵Nothing prevents us from attempting to examine this last possibility empirically, but of course, we could conduct any such research only in the light of the criteria established by the conceptual work.

⁶For example, we cannot observe whether a person is educated in Hirst's sense or whether he is inside a particular form of knowledge as readily as we can observe that he has a certain IQ or can perform the particular tasks called for by a so-called creativity test.

I have now reviewed the four essential characteristics of the holistic approach. To proponents of a comprehensive or holistic approach to curriculum, philosophy has a central role in curriculum, but not as a separate activity devoted to analyzing concepts in isolation or to examining values in a vacuum. Philosophy is not defined in terms of any specific method of analysis. They believe that we must first address conceptual questions, relating to both ends and means, fully and adequately, and at the same time we design a research project. Research conducted in the light of poor conceptualization, which often includes research that has scrupulously defined its terms, is poor research. Research conducted without reference to a clearly conceptualized educational context is literally nonsense, if it poses as educational research. But research conducted holistically, including most particularly a philosophical dimension, may well provide much practical guidance, even without the benefit of further empirical study.

THE USE OF THE HOLISTIC APPROACH

The main purpose of using a holistic approach, its chief determination, is to see curriculum studies as a contextual whole and to evaluate particular pieces of research and prescriptions in the light of that contextual whole; without a holistic vision, individual parts cannot make sense. Even the tire of an automobile has to be evaluated in terms of its suitability for a particular type of vehicle, in particular conditions; just so, in the far more complex world of curriculum does the nature of the enterprise have to be fully grasped as a prerequisite for any subsequent moves.

This purpose tells us how to proceed with a comprehensive approach to curriculum. The process begins, in formal terms, with an analysis of the key concepts of the educational enterprise in general and curriculum more particularly. A clearly articulated and coherent view of schooling and education and their various associated concepts (e.g., knowledge, socialization, moral education) has to be made explicit. There is room for argument over any such view. The demand is not that a view be incontestably established but that it be made explicit and backed by reasoning, not implicitly embedded in the methodology employed. Researchers, when designing their program, and others when assessing the claims of the research, must both be overtly aware that the adequacy of our methodology largely depends on our concept of the enterprise and our success at various points.

There is room for argument about what constitutes good conceptual analysis and how best to go about it. (My own sharp distinction between verbal definition and conceptual analysis would likely prove unacceptable to those committed to linguistic analysis.) Nonetheless, we must not confuse analyzing with giving examples or operational definitions, using similes, or listing symptoms.

The required analysis automatically furnishes criteria for determining whether a certain type of research is appropriate for a given issue and for assessing quality in research. The second step, when involved in curriculum studies in this mode, is therefore to distinguish between different kinds of questions that may lie intertwined in the immediate area of research and to devise a suitable strategy of investigation for each distinct kind of element. For example, an adequate concept of effective reading in relation to 15-year-olds will refer to certain physical and mental skills, understanding, aesthetic appreciation, and emotional response. Some of these phenomena can be directly observed easily, some with great difficulty, some in normal surroundings, and some under special conditions; some have to be approached through visible symptoms, some have to be discerned by intuition, and some through discussion with students or teachers; and many will involve further conceptual research. How can we reasonably talk of observing emotional responses, for example, without first offering the kind of conceptual analysis of emotion that is so far nowhere to be found in empirical research into emotions?

The third step is, having drawn up a variegated research design dictated by the logic of the educational context and the specific area of interest, to carry it out.

Perhaps this account of how to proceed is uncommonly and unwelcomely philosophical. But this way of approaching curriculum studies does not just happen to be advocated by some researchers who favor it, believe it will pay dividends, or know no better because of their own narrow training (reasons that all too often lie behind the espousal of specific forms of inquiry). The holistic approach is the explicit restatement of an undeniable truth, combined with the practical observation that it is high time we acted on this truth. The truth is that any empirical research consists essentially of two parts: the truly empirical element, which makes few demands on us intellectually, and the design of it, which is not an empirical business at all but a philosophical one. Virtually everybody knows this truth in principle and pays lip service to it. Nobody, for example, fails to appreciate that though the truly empirical part of Darwin's work was vital (collecting the data), the interesting, the difficult, and the crucial part of his theory of evolution is the philosophical part: reasoning out a logically sound explanation of the data. The problem in curriculum studies is that most people involved still proceed as if they can assess a form of inquiry abstractly by referring to such technical virtues as reliability and validity. A holistic approach does indeed set philosophy center stage, on the indisputable grounds that it belongs there.

This approach, therefore, does not constrain us to any one method. It demands that we break down what are usually complex questions or issues into their constituent parts and make the methodology fit the type. The holistic approach looks to conceptual analysis to say something to practical questions. Like philosophical analysis, a holistic approach uses that activity, but not just

that activity, unlike normative philosophical inquiry, a holistic approach is not interested only in normative issues.

In conclusion, much work that reflects or reveals this holistic approach has been critical in a negative rather than a positive sense. Much work from those who believe in these principles and who adopt a comprehensive view has been destructive rather than creative. The work has criticized other curriculum inquiry, finding it wanting. This outcome, of course, is inevitable, given the dominant tendency of curriculum theorists to align themselves with one or another partial forms of inquiry. Still, however, some positive work, albeit of a less specific and dogmatic nature than that associated with other types of curriculum inquiry, has come to light. For example, Paul Hirst, John P. White, Richard Pring, Hugh Sockett, John Wilson, Kieran Egan, Dennis Lawton, Denis Phillips, Decker F. Walker and Jonas Soltis, and James Gribble—all curriculum theorists adopting a holistic approach—have all, to varying degrees, made positive contributions to curriculum theory and practice.⁷ Perhaps they tend to be less specifically prescriptive than others who adopt narrower concepts of curriculum inquiry because they have right on their side.

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⁷Paul H. Hirst, *Knowledge and the Curriculum* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974); John P. White, *Towards a Compulsory Curriculum* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973); Richard Pring, *Knowledge and Schooling* (London: Open Books, 1976); Richard Pring, *Personal and Social Education in the Curriculum* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984); Hugh Sockett, *Designing the Curriculum* (London: Open Books, 1976); John Wilson, *Preface to the Philosophy of Education* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976); John Wilson, *Fantasy and Common Sense in Education* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1981); John Wilson, *What Philosophy Can Do* (Basingstoke, England: Macmillan, 1986); John Wilson, *Philosophy and Education Research* (Windsor, England: National Foundation for Education Research in England and Wales, 1972); Kieran Egan, *Educational Development* (New York: Oxford, 1979); Kieran Egan, *Education and Psychology* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1983); Dennis Lawton, *Class, Culture, and the Curriculum* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975); Denis C. Phillips, "Confounding the Grim Reaper," *Canadian Journal of Education* 13 (No. 1, 1988): 14–28; Decker F. Walker and Jonas F. Soltis, *Curriculum and Aims* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986); James Gribble, *Introduction to Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1969); James Gribble, *Literary Education. A Reevaluation* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

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