

## ***A Research Agenda***

### **SETTING PRIORITIES IN CURRICULUM RESEARCH**

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Much has been done in curriculum research in recent years, and much remains to be done.<sup>1</sup> Curriculum research, however, presents an enigma to many people. Does not deciding and doing curriculum involve practical matters rather than doing research? Doesn't the press of everyday realities in school's curriculums preclude doing careful research? Why should anyone recommend engaging in curriculum research when much of what has been studied to date seems so remote or irrelevant to the actual business of developing and using curriculum? How can we understand curriculum research as an enterprise that can inform curriculum practice when so much of what has paraded under the banner of curriculum research has made no attempt to explain how it connects with ongoing curriculum practice? Where are the guidelines for using the research that most closely relates to curriculum practice? Who's in charge of deciding what curriculum research should be done anyway?

Lest we become totally frustrated or cynical about the role or value of curriculum research in curriculum practice, we should note that more clarity of purpose and more interrelationships between contemporary curriculum research and curriculum practice are being articulated in recent literature than this litany of questions might suggest. In this brief article, I wish to turn to these ideas and try to make the case that we can usefully order curriculum research and that there are reasonable criteria for deciding what curriculum research is most worth doing. Before setting forth these arguments, I need to lay some background on (1) what we mean by curriculum practice and by curriculum research, (2) how they may relate to each other, and (3) what the accumulated work in curriculum research has produced so far that is at the same time so positive and so disconcerting.

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<sup>1</sup>Philip A. Jackson, *Handbook of Curriculum Research* (New York: Macmillan, in press), Edmund C. Short, "Curriculum Research in Retrospect" (ERIC Document No. 282 919).

## CURRICULUM PRACTICE

Curriculum practice, for purposes of this discussion, is defined as all those practical activities concerned with conceiving, expressing, justifying, and enacting educational programs. The scope of curriculum practice under this definition is intentionally broad to encompass as many dimensions of work related to curriculum as possible. It includes not only curriculum policymaking and curriculum development but also the communication of those substantive decisions and rationales to teachers and others who then must create the reality envisioned by the curriculum in students' day-to-day educational experiences. Ongoing curriculum activities also include organizing teachers, school schedules, and pupils in optimum ways so that we can carry out the curriculum in workable institutional arrangements. Reorienting teachers, other school personnel, parents, and most certainly the students themselves about any curriculum changes being inaugurated are other curriculum activities. Additional work includes determining what actual curriculum changes to introduce from time to time under the current policies and plans as well as determining whether we need to reconsider some current curriculum policies and plans themselves. All these, and perhaps other, practical curriculum activities are undertaken locally. In addition, other similar activities are undertaken by state, national, private, or independent agencies that supplement or feed into local curriculum activities.

This broad array of curriculum activities is best summarized by the four categories stated in the overall definition of curriculum practice: conceiving, expressing, justifying, and enacting educational programs. All four are necessary if we are to integrate the range of curriculum activities purposefully. Getting absorbed in doing particular activities in this complex, ever-changing field of practice is so likely that we can easily lose sight of or forget the primary functions of curriculum practice. Curriculum practice first and foremost has to do with creating and conducting educational programs for students' benefit. To say that curriculum practice is defined by its four primary functions means that providing educational programs involves attending to all four functions in relation to each other—not simply to any one, two, or three of them.

First, we must conceive or envision a program, considering what constitutes an educated person, what experiences and subject matter will lead to that goal, and how best to organize these experiences and subject matter over a span of years for all students involved. Second, we must express and communicate this conception of curriculum in a form that is inspiring and practical, clear and flexible, and readily comprehensible to those who must enter into it at particular points and must make it work with students. Third, we have to explain and justify the curriculum conceived and expressed. This third function of curriculum practice is fundamental to gaining the acceptance and commitment of various constituencies, including the public, policymakers, professional educators, and students. Rationales for various

facets of the program must be persuasively argued and communicated to all parties.

Fourth, and perhaps the most difficult function of curriculum practice, is the necessity to enact the curriculum conceived, expressed, and justified. The phrase *to enact a curriculum* conveys the idea that curriculum does not end with a document but must become educative reality for students if they are to acquire the benefits of the envisioned curriculum. This facet of curriculum practice, however, has often been taken for granted or left to teachers' conventional practice without careful provision for guidance on how to enact a curriculum or some aspect of it. The fourth function of curriculum practice involves not only providing guidance but also helping teachers and other educators become proficient in making the curriculum envisioned and designed become embodied in the minds and hearts of students. These four functions of curriculum practice and their interrelationships thus define the scope of curriculum activities related to creating and conducting educational programs and, at the same time, help keep curriculum practice focused on its primary purposes.

#### CURRICULUM RESEARCH

The purpose of curriculum research is to ask and answer questions that generate knowledge related to curriculum practice. Thus, the scope of curriculum research is defined by the needs for knowledge in carrying out the many activities of curriculum practice. Spelling out in great detail the nature and methods of curriculum research is not appropriate here; this information is available elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> But a few fundamentals will justify the place of curriculum research in relation to curriculum practice.

All research involves generating knowledge prompted by a focal question. The question must be of a certain type—not a question of opinion or judgment about what to do or what to believe but a question of epistemic significance—one for which an answer can be obtained that anyone would come to, given the circumstances and using the appropriate logic of procedure. I deliberately cast this matter in the most general language because knowledge is not just factual as in the scientific disciplines, nor just perceptual as in the artistic disciplines, nor just normative as in the moral or critical disciplines. Knowledge comes in many types. It can even be action-oriented as in action research (though it merely informs actions but does not tell us which action is best or right). Yet all knowledge is derived from invoking the same type of focal question—one that is answerable and amenable to the epistemological and methodological processes of disciplined inquiry

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<sup>2</sup>Edmund C. Short, ed., *Forms of Curriculum Inquiry* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

Elsewhere I have traced the relation of curriculum research to these fundamental concepts of knowledge-generating questions and methods<sup>3</sup> Curriculum research is no different from other research in purpose or approach. It just asks different questions from ones asked in the physical sciences, in the arts, or in the other academic disciplines. It asks different questions from those asked in other fields of practice as well. Knowledge needed in curriculum practice is not the same knowledge needed in agriculture or in engineering, though these fields of practice share some common interests that make their research more like that done in the curriculum field than the research done in the academic disciplines. Knowledge needed in a practical field like curriculum depends on what questions amenable to research arise about the many varied activities that make up curriculum practice.

If we are engaged in designing curriculum, we might need to know, for example, the consequences of prescribing a certain set of experiences for 8-year-olds. We might turn to research in psychology to understand what 8-year-olds are generally capable of learning. But if we need to know whether we could assign this same set of experiences to some other age level or to any other age level, we would need to turn to curriculum research that focuses not on what certain-age children are capable of learning but on the results of attempts to provide these experiences at many different levels with an interest in finding out what difference, if any, the placement of these experiences has on children's learning. I haven't specified what exactly we are talking about here, so I cannot say whether the relevant research has or has not already been done. The research needed to answer many curriculum research questions about the placement of learning experiences has, in fact, not yet been done. Nevertheless, this example illustrates the type of curriculum research question unique to the problems of curriculum practice, and it suggests a need for knowledge that truly arises in the course of making practical curriculum design decisions.

Another example of a different type of curriculum research involves a broad curriculum policy question. What are the consequences of importing externally developed curriculums versus developing curriculums internally in a local school district? An analysis of these (and other) alternative curriculum development strategies has turned up some significant findings<sup>4</sup> Knowledge of this type is useful when trying to decide locally whether to import and attempt to implement an externally developed program or to engage in local development.

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<sup>3</sup>Edmund C. Short, "Understanding Curriculum Inquiry," in *Forms of Curriculum Inquiry*, ed. Edmund C. Short (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 1-25.

<sup>4</sup>Edmund C. Short, "The Forms and Uses of Alternative Curriculum Development Strategies Policy Implications," *Curriculum Inquiry* 13 (Spring 1983): 43-64.

THE RELATION OF CURRICULUM RESEARCH  
TO CURRICULUM PRACTICE

Has anyone drawn up a matrix of various curriculum activities or decisions generally required in curriculum practice and a corresponding set of researchable curriculum questions associated with each kind of curriculum activity or decision? Given such a matrix, we might logically think that curriculum researchers would have been working away at generating the needed knowledge. However, I am not aware of the existence of such a matrix or of any systematic attempt to generate needed curriculum knowledge on this basis.<sup>5</sup>

The curriculum research generated in recent years is marked by no such logical agenda. It is on the whole, and at first glance, rather sprawling and ordered more by chance than by design. Nevertheless, this haphazard approach to determining what curriculum research should be done has produced a wealth of curriculum research, and we should acknowledge the merits of this approach.<sup>6</sup> Its limitations should be acknowledged as well.

First, relatively little curriculum research has focused directly on knowledge needed in curriculum practice. Walker contends that "our understanding of most curriculum issues is clearly limited and fallible."<sup>7</sup> He makes a case for building a sound knowledge base for curriculum decision making and for drawing on the relevant knowledge when it is available.<sup>8</sup>

Second, much research done in curriculum falls outside the definition of curriculum and curriculum practice I have used in this article. I do not mean to say, however, that this ancillary research has no use in the curriculum field, it may be quite useful in providing knowledge about other things that we draw on when making curriculum decisions, it is just not curricular knowledge. Much of the work cited in the Jackson volume falls under this category.<sup>9</sup>

Third, much of this corpus of so-called curriculum research has an indirect or a potentially long-term effect on curriculum practice. Several chapters found in *Forms of Curriculum Inquiry* cite evidence of many deliberate attempts to avoid practical, immediate curriculum questions in favor of more remote, background questions of historical, philosophical, or theoretical significance that researchers believe important to the field in the long run.<sup>10</sup> I would affirm,

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<sup>5</sup>Edmund C. Short, "Organizing What We Know about Curriculum," *Curriculum Inquiry* 15 (Fall 1985): 237-243.

<sup>6</sup>Philip A. Jackson, *Handbook of Curriculum Research* (New York: Macmillan, in press), Edmund C. Short, ed., *Forms of Curriculum Inquiry* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

<sup>7</sup>Decker F. Walker, *Fundamentals of Curriculum* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), p. 188.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, p. 480.

<sup>9</sup>Philip A. Jackson, *Handbook of Curriculum Research* (New York: Macmillan, in press)

<sup>10</sup>Edmund C. Short, ed., *Forms of Curriculum Inquiry* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

after a careful reading of the chapters in this book, that the authors of this book often have a legitimate basis for this belief and for attacking the kind of questions that will not immediately answer ordinary questions of curriculum practice. This situation results from researchers' freedom to choose the matters they wish to address, unconstrained by practical and immediate considerations for needed knowledge. We should honor and ultimately evaluate this work in terms of whether it provides new ways of thinking about curriculum and curriculum practice and eventually influences them. Some work reported in this book, nonetheless, does directly affect questions coming up in curriculum practice.

The record of the current state of curriculum research justifies the ambivalence with which many people view this field of research. In one sense, the productivity is high. The work varies in kind and in approach; seeing such diversity in a field that only a few years ago was characteristically viewed as narrow and limited in its research is pleasing.<sup>11</sup> In another sense, the field is correctly viewed as paying little attention to the knowledge needs of curriculum practice, and for this inattention it deserves to be chastised. In a general sense, the field of curriculum research is engaging more and more scholars in significant work, whether directly or indirectly addressing the knowledge needs of practice. If any criticism can be leveled at the field as a whole, it is that perhaps it has not yet got its priorities straight and that it does not yet see how anything other than business as usual might be desirable.

#### PRIORITY QUESTIONS IN CURRICULUM RESEARCH

I urge placing highest priority in curriculum research on addressing questions arising in curriculum practice that require direct or practical answers. That task is easier said than done, of course, and I do not wish to suggest by this assertion that we should necessarily drop or curtail other kinds of curriculum research. I do want to suggest an ordered conception of what we can and should do in curriculum research and a reasonable set of criteria for deciding what is most worth doing.

Let me start by stating why I think we are in the present uneasy situation in curriculum research. We can probably attribute the little knowledge generated on questions arising from curriculum practice to the real difficulty researchers have in addressing these questions. Some require longitudinal studies that call for more resources and more time than anyone has, as perhaps would be the case with the design question about the optimum placement of learning experiences. Another problem is the separation of professional curriculum researchers from professional curriculum practitioners. While the people dealing with curriculum practice may know what they need more

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<sup>11</sup>Edmund C. Short, "Knowledge Production and Utilization in Curriculum," *Review of Educational Research* 43 (Summer 1973): 237-301.

knowledge about, the researchers capable of generating the knowledge often do not hear the practitioners' questions and are removed enough from practice that they do not generate similar questions on their own. One solution would be to encourage practitioners to engage in the needed research themselves; another would be to bring the two groups together in some way to enhance communication between them. Another more technical reason for the current situation is that practical questions almost always require interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary forms of inquiry, and most contemporary curriculum researchers are schooled in disciplinary forms of inquiry, which inevitably make their work contribute a part of the answer to a given question or constitute only one segment in a long line of research that will eventually add up to the big picture.<sup>12</sup>

What can we do about this situation? We must start by clarifying the tools of the trade and what kinds of questions these research tools can help answer. *Forms of Curriculum Inquiry* clearly shows that many researchers have been using forms of inquiry associated with the disciplines (philosophy, history, science, art, etc.).<sup>13</sup> These forms of inquiry can contribute curriculum knowledge, but we need to draw on this work in doing interdisciplinary inquiry in curriculum, which is the primary method for focusing on practical questions. This insight has not yet hit home among curriculum researchers. Forms of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary inquiry include action, deliberative, integrative, evaluative, critical, normative, and theoretical—those types of inquiry where we are short of real experts. So, besides identifying some matrix of researchable questions related to curriculum practice, we must recognize the need to address these questions with appropriate forms of inquiry.<sup>14</sup> We also need to educate curriculum researchers in these forms of inquiry and provide some incentive for using them to address questions from curriculum practice. Again, we might prepare practitioners to do their own research or to work in teams with professional researchers. At the least, we should call a conference of those working in curriculum practice to identify an agenda of research questions they think we must answer and get them to set priorities for the most urgent and most significant ones. Then we must organize the curriculum research community to find ways to get started on these priority questions.

To illustrate, let me cite potential work of just one type that we can explore through interdisciplinary methods of inquiry. (I have illustrated other types elsewhere.<sup>15</sup>) Grove and Short propose methods of theoretical inquiry in

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<sup>12</sup>Edmund C. Short, ed., *Forms of Curriculum Inquiry* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, chaps. 11–17.

<sup>15</sup>Edmund C. Short, "Understanding Curriculum Inquiry," in *Forms of Curriculum Inquiry*, ed. Edmund C. Short (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 1–25.

curriculum research for addressing questions of curriculum structure and design.<sup>16</sup> They cite studies on 10 categories of questions under the topic of curriculum structure and design—including curriculum development strategies, content selection and organization, materials development, establishment of educational objectives, and formulation of curriculum plans and guidelines. We need an agenda of research questions in each area of curriculum practice on which practitioners need knowledge. Then we need to set priorities for evaluating the most urgent and most commonly asked questions. Once identified, these questions should be addressed by inventing and testing alternative structures using interdisciplinary methods of inquiry familiar to those with expertise in theoretical inquiry.<sup>17</sup> For better or worse, research of this type takes a great deal of time and money, but we might as well get at the task if we want eventually to generate useful curriculum knowledge. With this work as our focus of attention and recognizing that our primary tools are interdisciplinary, we can more readily use even our disciplinary and other indirect methods of research in answering the priority questions of curriculum practice.

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Ben-Peretz, Miriam, and Rainer Bromme, eds. *The Nature of Time in Schools: Theoretical Concepts, Practitioner Perceptions*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1990. 310 pp. \$21.95.

Although instructional time is the primary focus of this book, some contributors relate time to curriculum and curriculum planning. Research from six countries is included.

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<sup>16</sup>Richard W. Grove and Edmund C. Short, "Theoretical Inquiry," in *Forms of Curriculum Inquiry*, ed. Edmund C. Short (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 211–224.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

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