

Conceptualizing the Curriculum: Towards A Renaissance for Theory

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Abstract

The field of curriculum is awash with theorizing on the concept of ‘curriculum’ and ‘curriculum theory’. A meta understanding by scholars provides a generalized view through which curricula is conceptualized. The effect is singular in approach: implying the fundamental view on education in the wake of rapid emerging trends such as globalization. This paper addresses the conceptualization of curriculum in view of enhancing a renaissance towards curriculum thoughts among the supra system of practice. It hinges on the perspectives of curriculum theory and the trends in the dimensions of future educational experiences as translate theory into practice. It concludes that curriculum theory should reinvent itself to offer solutions of myriad educational problems and then assert a dominant field living obsequiously as other disciplines in social sciences.

Key Word: ‘Curriculum’; ‘Curriculum Theory’; ‘Education’; ‘Renaissance’

Introduction

1- The Concept of Curriculum- An Overview

Curriculum as a field of inquiry and scientific study is grounded on the Dewey’s progressive philosophy of child-centred approaches to learning around the formative years of 1900s. This is on the perception that content and learning experiences in the school should aspire on the needs and interests of the learner. John Dewey adopted the ‘ideas of democracy and social reforms’ as pinnacles for curriculum. The purpose of education should not revolve around the acquisition of a pre-determined set of skills, but rather the realization of one’s full potential and the ability to use those skills for the greater good. This theory created the view on experiential learning which curriculum aspires for.

Franklin Bobbit in *The Curriculum: A Summary of the Development Concerning the Theory of the Curriculum*. (1918) postured on the wave to make an empirical analysis of curriculum which was to prepare students for their future roles in the society. This called for dynamic content in the rapid social facets to replace the old. Bobbitt showed that curriculum is concerned with adaptation and adoption. Bobbitt’s theory had five principles: (a) analysis of human experience, (b) job analysis, (c) deriving objectives, (d) selecting objectives, and (e) planning in detail. Curriculum was to provide subjects of living, such as citizenship and leisure.

The major impetus in the field of curriculum emerged at the University of Chicago in 1947 when Ralph Tyler presented a monograph after an "Eight-Year Study" (1933-1941), on a national programme, that addressed inflexibility of school curricula to explain a rationale for viewing, analyzing, and interpreting the curriculum and instructional programme for any educational institution. Any curriculum should start by focusing on his four fundamental questions.

- i) What educational purposes should the school seek to attain?
- ii) What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes?
- iii) How can these educational experiences be effectively organized?
- iv) How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained?

These questions can be reformulated in a simple four step by step process which a curriculum is planned and developed.

- a) identifying the objectives
- b) selecting means for attainment

- c) organizing these learning experiences
- d) Evaluating the outcomes.

The curriculum planner must identify the three sources of objectives; that is the learners, the subject specialist and the contemporary society. These objectives must undergo screening through the philosophical and psychological screens. Selection of the learning experiences is a means of giving the stated objectives and these have to effectively organize using the requisite criteria. Finally, there is evaluation to find out the effectiveness of the programme.

Tyler presents the matrix for curriculum theory which is to be followed in the design of plan for instruction. However, some variance emerged in this thinking from Smith, Stanley & Shores (1957) who espoused that ‘...A sequence of potential experiences is set up in the school for the purpose of disciplining children and youth in group ways of thinking and acting. This set of experiences is referred to as the curriculum.’

Taba (1962) conceptualized a flexible model of curriculum renewal, with supposed base of practicing teachers and school leadership taking responsibility for the school curricular. Taba’s curriculum theory, had the principle of a ‘spiral’ curriculum, inductive teaching strategies for the development of concepts, generalizations and applications; organization of content on three levels—key ideas, organizational ideas and facts—and her general strategy for developing thinking through the social studies curriculum that provided a foundation of modern curriculum theories.

Taba’s ideas on curriculum are an exposition of Tyler’s rather linear psychological principles of curriculum development: attributing to them a more pedagogical and practical nature. Krull & Kurm, (1996) identifies four principles that govern Taba’s curriculum theory:

First, social processes, including the socialization of human beings, are not linear, and they cannot be modelled through linear planning. In other words, learning and development of personality cannot be considered as one-way processes of establishing educational aims and deriving specific objectives from an ideal of education proclaimed or imagined by some authority.

Secondly, social institutions, among them school curricula and programmes, are more likely to be effectively rearranged if, instead of the common way of administrative reorganization—from top to bottom—a well-founded and co-ordinated system of development from bottom to top can be used. Also, the development of new curricula and programmes is more effective if it is based on the principles of democratic guidance and on the well-founded distribution of work. The emphasis is on the partnership based on competence, and not on administration. Finally, the renovation of curricula and programmes is not a short-term effort but a long process, lasting for years.

Another purposive view is held by Goodland & Ritcher (1966) who see curriculum as a set of intended learning; the end products of education-its outcomes. The essence of a curriculum is to envision the broad goals and objectives of the school to become the instrument of enhancing decisions that will impart social, cultural, political and religious values of a society that will create relevance to it in the changing dimensions of the modern world.

II- Curriculum Theory: Construct, Application and Renaissance

There is definitive explanation that a theory is an analytical tools for understanding, explaining, and making predictions about a given subject matter. Kerlinger (1973) see it as a set of interrelated constructs, definitions and propositions that present a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables with the purpose of explaining and predicting the phenomena. Kliebard (2004) sees curriculum theory as development and enactment of curriculum. These can be empirically tested to ingrain their functions.

Curriculum theories have attempted to serve the purpose of enlightenment in society. Keith (2004) argues that curriculum discourse should be marked by richness... diversity, discordant voices, fecundity, multiple rationalities, and theories, and should replace outworn but convenient labels ... to touch major issues in everyday life. Notable theorists like Freire sees education as an instrument to facilitate the integration of generations into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the ‘practice of freedom’, the means by which men and women deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world."

It is about creating a radical paradigm shift in the conception, development, implementation and consequent evaluation of the curriculum process in view to gear up to the transformative directions endeavored for.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire, explores the dualism of advocating that education should allow the oppressed to regain their humanity and overcome their condition. Such is the power of curriculum theory; enhancing a renaissance into the thoughts of the individuals in society. Other theorists such as Maxine Greene (2007) or Giroux (2010) appreciate the transformative roles of curriculum and its attendants such as culture and arts. Curriculum renaissance should become an intellectual transformation for the pursuits of educational goals. It can encompass a resurgence of gradual learning and educational reforms towards emerging trends in field of curriculum theory. When ... curriculum scholars shed ideological blinders, clearly delineate the boundaries of the field, consciously build upon the field's constructive legacies, and foster a robust interplay between curriculum theory and curriculum practice, then a renaissance in curriculum theory and development will be at hand. Wraga, W & Hlebowitsh, P (2003).

III- Conclusion

This paper has made an exploration of curriculum theorizing as a parameter for decisions on curriculum theory which emanates from the society. Our experiences and values which define the direction of future trends can be harnessed so that curriculum decisions align with the emerging trends for learners to be shaped to become a force in the realms of cultural and social phenomena. Theory therefore becomes a point of departure and an imperative to curriculum planners the world over.

IV- Field for Further Research

Curriculum scholars and researchers at large are bound to explore the practical role of theory into practice. Moreover, the aspect of yielding in curriculum renaissance and rebirth can also be point of focus as we thrust towards the dynamics and challenges of this Century.

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