The Curriculum: Field Without a Past?

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Recent studies have revealed a dearth of attention by curriculum specialists and workers to the historical background and antecedents within their own field.

ALTHOUGH the curriculum field has witnessed reform after reform in its brief history, each new generation of curriculum workers has attempted to answer continuing and recurring questions with little regard for their historical antecedents. This characteristic stance has given rise to the charge that curriculum specialists are "ahistorical" in outlook, in that their theories and proposals suffer both from a lack of knowledge of the curricular past and from selective and superficial understandings of the work of curriculum predecessors.

Kliebard, for example, described these tendencies by stating that, in the curriculum field, "issues seem to arise *ex nihilo*; each generation is left to discover anew the persistent and perplexing problems that characterize the field" (1968a, p. 69). In that same article, Kliebard further asserted his belief that lack of perspective condemns curriculum workers to repeat the slogans and rallying cries of an earlier day as if these statements still had the immediacy of former years.

Goodlad levied similar criticisms in his analysis of the curriculum reforms of the early 1960s, lamenting that "A substantial number of the new crop of reformers have approached the persistent, recurring problems of curriculum construction in the naïve belief that no one had looked at them before" (1966, p. 91). This apparent neglect of curriculum history is further substantiated by a recent survey of doctoral dissertations in the various fields of professional education, in which the sample of dissertations in the area of curriculum included no studies of a historical nature (Wick and Dirkes, 1973).

Proponents of investigation of the curriculum past have cited varied rationales for the needs for such studies. Alice Miel (1964) has suggested that the impression of this century in curriculum theory is one of recurring cycles of certainty born of oversimplification followed by uncertainty resulting from loss of faith in the simplistic theories. Historical perspective, she believes,

would help curriculum specialists gain control of the field through understanding, rather than continuing the pattern of merely responding to the whims of a changing world. And Kliebard (1968a), quoting C. Wright Mill, has indicated that the history of the field must be studied not to solve current problems, but to rid ourselves of the past—a feeling shared by Bellack (1969). With the curriculum field now apparently in a period of uncertainty following the spate of reforms in the 1960's, the potential value of a dialog with the past has increased. A handful of studies have pointed some directions by looking into the formative years of the field, key figures and committees of the past, and recurring issues and problems in curriculum making.

The Formative Years

By far the greatest attention has been focused on the early years of the curriculum field. Seguel (1966) explored the decades from the 1890's through the 1930's investigating the contributions of seven representative figures: Charles and Frank McMurray (Herbartians), John Dewey, Franklin Bobbitt, W. W. Charters, Harold Rugg, and Hollis Caswell. From her studies, Seguel concluded that these men shared four common and persistent interests regarding the curriculum—the nature of knowledge, the nature of the knowing process, the professional status of the new field, and procedures for introducing new curriculum insights into broad practice. Both Kliebard (1968a) and Caswell (1966) agree that the history of the curriculum as a professional field dates from the early 1920's, with the publication of Bobbitt's *The Curriculum* in 1918 as the first major landmark.

Caswell further indicated that the first two decades of professional curriculum study were characterized by large-scale programs of curriculum revision both on the local level, as in the Denver and Winnetka systems, and on the state level, as with his own work in Virginia. Kliebard concluded that the proposals of the early leaders in the field were marked by concerns for efficiency and tendencies toward oversimplification of the complexities of learning; tendencies that, according to Kliebard, still plague curriculum development. While Callahan's (1962) study does not focus directly on curriculum, his data and conclusions do lend support to Kliebard's contentions and offer a more complete picture of education and society in those early years.

Two works bearing the imprint of Harold Rugg serve both as primary sources and as interpretations of early curriculum history. The 26th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education (Rugg, 1926) and Rugg's *American Life and the School Curriculum* (1936) both discuss the foundations and intellectual heritage of 20th century curriculum work, with the latter concentrating on the key ancestors of the Progressive theories. Tyler (1971), Vars (1972), and Wardeberg (1972) also recount facets of the history of the curriculum in the 1920's and 1930's, with Tyler detailing the main points of the 1926 NSSE Yearbook and Vars and Wardeberg reporting Progressive proposals for the elementary and secondary curricula.

Committees and Projects

Certainly the most conspicuous event of the recent past in the curriculum field was the proliferation of reforms in the post-Sputnik years of the late 1950's and 1960's. These projects, characterized by new curricula based on the structure of the disciplines and typically produced by committees composed primarily of experts in the various content areas, were analyzed by both Goodlad and Davis. Goodlad (1966) reported the salient features of each of the several projects based on the pattern established by Jerrold Zacharias's Physical Sciences Study Committee (PSSC), concluding that the proliferation of committees and projects has contributed significantly to the semantic thicket that has grown up around the curriculum field with regard to such methods as "inquiry" and "discovery." Davis (1968) sketched the social and educational situation surrounding the reforms of the day, differ-

entiating the role of the committees of the 1950's and 1960's from the functions of committees in earlier years. He concluded that the intentions of current committees to produce fully developed and "teacher-proof" curriculum materials have resulted in instructional confusion and in an inability to have teachers commit themselves to trying the new courses.

Specific methods and individuals have been the subjects of several recent dissertations. Newman (1961) focused on the use of the *Building America* magazines in California schools, while Bleeke (1968) studied the development of the project method. Hansen (1971) added information about the curriculum field in the neglected years of the 1940's and 1950's by concentrating on the career of one of the major figures of that time, Kimball Wiles.

Continuing Issues and Problems

As Bellack (1969, p. 288) has indicated, to say that contemporary curriculum problems have roots in the past is to be guilty of stating the obvious. "But," he writes, "given the pervasive ahistorical posture of the curriculum field, it is a truism that curriculum specialists would do well to keep in mind." Because of the lack of space, only studies dealing with one problem of curriculum construction—setting objectives—will be summarized here.

Two studies by Kliebard and one by Eisner sketch the historical development of attempts to state objectives with clarity and lack of ambiguity. Eisner (1967) examined the somewhat linear development of behavioral and measurable objectives from Thorndike and Bobbitt through the present, concluding that objectives stated in a manner facilitating test making have continually failed to aid in understanding the process of learning and curiosity which can best be described, according to Eisner, in poetic or metaphorical terms.

Kliebard's articles echo Eisner's skepticism regarding behavioral objectives. The first (1968b) focuses primarily on the work of two men, Franklin Bobbitt and Ralph Tyler. Bobbitt, according to Kliebard, formalized the process of stating objectives as a prerequisite to writing curriculum, while Tyler represents the longevity of the trend. Kliebard ends his analysis by criticizing behaviorally stated objectives for promoting a theory that is too naïvely simple to be descriptive of reality and for assuming a moral posture closer to indoctrination than to education.

In "The Tyler Rationale" (1970) Kliebard continues his analysis of the Bobbitt-Tyler tradition by concentrating on Tyler's famous four questions—a rationale Kliebard calls the most persistent theoretical formulation in the field of curriculum. Within the process of stating objectives, selecting, organizing, and evaluating experiences, the most important step in the Bobbitt-Tyler tradition is that of stating objectives, a feat usually accomplished with the aid of some kind of social or scientific analysis such as Bobbitt's activity analysis. Proponents of this tradition would do well, Kliebard feels, to remember the caution of Boyd Bode and others who indicated that no scientific analysis can determine desirability or need.

Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Research

While it is evident that curricular issues cannot be settled by historical analysis, the consensus of the authors reviewed here is that additional study of curriculum history can add perspective to continuing disputes. Many areas of the curriculum past remain virtually untouched, and others need further study. Cremin (1966) has cited the need for studies of individuals. Others have called for interpretations of the decades of the 1940's and 1950's. And there is, as yet, no comprehensive survey of the curriculum field from its beginnings to the present. In short, though curriculum history can promise no solutions, a rediscovery of the past can serve as a partial corrective to a long-standing characteristic of the field—that of ahistoricism.

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