

## PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION IN CURRICULUM

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*This paper by Herbert M. Kliebard was written in 1977 but was never published. Its continuing relevance merits the careful attention of current and future scholars and practitioners in the field of curriculum studies. The Journal of Curriculum and Supervision is pleased to present this previously unpublished paper as one of a series of such work that it occasionally publishes. The central questions Kliebard addresses here are directly but powerfully analyzed. He deals with the complexities of defining curriculum with considerable simplicity and economy. For those who have never before had access to this paper, it provides both insight and perspective on a fundamental conceptual problem in the field. This classic statement, despite its brevity, may still prove valuable in sorting out the essence of curriculum.*

Defining what curriculum development consists of has proven to be more elusive than appears on the surface. The question involves not simply what the curriculum is, but what constitutes the work of those people who are primarily identified with the curriculum field. From all the activities that we can identify as educational, broadly speaking, what are those that we can legitimately count as distinctive to curriculum, and what can we reasonably exclude? Singularly uninformative in addressing this problem were the many definitions of curriculum that have appeared over the years in journal articles, commission reports, and curriculum textbooks—definitions such as “the curriculum consists of all experiences that a pupil has or is likely to have in school” and “a sequence of potential experiences is set up in school for the purpose of disciplining children and youth in group ways of thinking and acting.”

Similarly unilluminating was the injunction that curriculum development is what curriculum developers do. During the period when I was perplexed by this problem, I attended a social gathering where I observed a professor of physics dancing the bugaloo. If physics is what physicists do, I thought, then surely those gyrations should be included. Ultimately, no simple, straightforward observation of what people do is very helpful in arriving at a definition

of the field unless we first have a reasonable conception of what constitutes that field, and unless this conception remains in a state of constant interaction with the perceived activities. But where would such a conception come from?

The approach I took in attempting to resolve this dilemma was based on an examination of those persistent questions that have over the course of 70 years or so characterized the curriculum field. In other words, we could ask, what questions have been characterized as curriculum questions by the actors who themselves engaged in the process of trying to answer them? Similarly, to what extent did others regard these problems as appropriate to curriculum development? In general, these questions flowed from what, at least on an intuitive level, we could regard as the central problem of the curriculum field. What should we teach?

The question of what we should teach is analogous to the central question in economics. How can we mediate between unlimited wants and limited resources? If human wants were sharply circumscribed, enough so that there would be no scarcity, or if available resources existed in such great abundance as to create no problem in meeting all human wants, then there would be no field of economics. Likewise, if there were no such activity as teaching and no issue as to whether we should teach this thing or that, then there would be no field of curriculum. Carried one step further, if human mental capacities were so great that everything could be known or if the amount of knowledge available were so small that it could be known to everyone, then we would have no need for the study of curriculum. Given this starting point—what should we teach?—we can then proceed to examine the questions that inevitably, or almost inevitably, flow from that general consideration.

One feature of the work that curriculum developers do, particularly those who associate themselves with curriculum theory, involves justifying why we should teach *this* rather than *that* when we plan school activities and programs. The central question of the curriculum requires a value decision. It implies choice among competing options. Thus, curriculum developers are not simply interested in “effective” ways of teaching history but with the question of what, if anything, makes history a worthwhile study. Presumably, we do not deliberately teach something simply because, like Mount Everest, “it’s there.” Benjamin Franklin recognized the crucial nature of this question when, in 1749, he set forth his proposals for educating the young of Pennsylvania. “As to their STUDIES,” Franklin declares, “it would be well if they could be taught *every Thing* that is useful, and *every Thing* that is ornamental, but Art is long, and their Time is short. It is therefore propos’d that they learn those Things that are likely to be most useful and most ornamental.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Benjamin Franklin, “Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania (1789),” in *Benjamin Franklin on Education*, ed. John Hardin Best (New York: Teachers College Press, 1964), p. 135.

Curriculum decision making also involves the problem of distribution. We should be prepared to address the question of who should get what knowledge through the institution of schooling generally, and the vehicle of curriculum in particular. As the English sociologist Michael F. D. Young has contended, all knowledge is socially constructed, and this point is of fundamental importance in curriculum thinking. Young and others have argued from this sociology-of-knowledge vantage point that "the school curriculum becomes just one of the mechanisms through which knowledge is 'socially distributed.'"<sup>2</sup> If this "socially distributed" knowledge gets parceled out according to, say, social class or race or gender, then this view would have the highest significance for any relationship we may assume between education and social mobility. When we consider knowledge a commodity of value and the curriculum the major mechanism of deliberate distribution (as in the case of the distribution of capital goods and services generally), we would like to know who gets what. To say, "We should teach history," therefore, is an elliptical statement. We must always be teaching something to someone, and this statement implies some attention to the question of who gets taught history and who does not.

But knowledge is not simply a commodity. We cannot conceive of the effects of studying history or mathematics or foreign languages merely as product. To be sure, we may learn particular things. We may learn names and dates in history, how to solve quadratic equations, and we may become proficient in a foreign language, and knowledge of these things may turn out to be of fundamental social significance. But the study of various subjects has an effect also on how we think. This presumed effect on thinking itself has a crucial bearing on what we mean by *effective* when we set about considering "effective" programs in this or that subject. Thus, in science, we may consider product (knowing the atomic valences) to be clearly subordinate to the consideration of science as a mode of inquiry. Therefore, in curriculum planning, we may choose to emphasize those features of science that exhibit the nature of scientific inquiry rather than science as a codifier of knowledge.

John Henry (Cardinal) Newman has astutely recognized this notion of the effects of studying a subject as opposed to merely mastering the content of a subject in his consideration of the idea of a university. Referring to what we now call disciplines as "Sciences," Newman argues that although these "Sciences" all have as their common end "the attainment of truth," it becomes the office of the educator to consider them "as regards the influence which they exercise upon those whose education consists in the study of them."<sup>3</sup> The disciplines of history, science, and mathematics would exist and function,

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<sup>2</sup>Michael F. D. Young, "An Approach to Curricula as Socially Organized Knowledge," in *Knowledge and Control*, ed. Michael F. D. Young (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1971), p. 27.

<sup>3</sup>John Henry Newman, "The Uses of Knowledge," in *The Uses of Knowledge*, ed. Leo L. Ward (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1948), pp. 8-9.

obviously, even if there were no schools and no curriculum. In systematic curriculum planning, we consider not only their general status and function as disciplines but what happens to people and to their ways of thinking when they study these disciplines. In their effort to take into account what they regard as the desirable effects of studying a subject, therefore, curriculum developers also give deliberate attention to how subjects should be taught. They consider not only what should be taught and what knowledge gets distributed to whom but what rules should govern teaching a subject, since the way we teach unquestionably influences the effects that accrue from studying a subject.

Newman also alludes to a related issue of supreme importance in deliberate curriculum development. the question of balance and integration of the various studies. The fields of study, he says, "into which our knowledge may be said to be cast, have multiplied bearings on one another, and an internal sympathy, and admit, or rather demand, comparison and adjustment. They complete, correct, balance each other."<sup>4</sup> An additional feature of systematic curriculum development, then, is close attention to balance and integration with respect to the various components of the curriculum, we do not view the subjects of study as isolated and insulated entities. It is not simply the individual effects of studying various subjects that becomes crucial but the overall effect of the various studies seen in relation to one another.

To reflect faithfully the nature of the enterprise, we must, therefore, expand the notion of curriculum development beyond the commonsensical definition of curriculum as the subjects of study and even the topics and subheadings that fall under them. The problems and issues that define curriculum as a field of study imply at least four principal considerations:

- Curriculum development includes justifications for why certain things should be studied in school rather than others. Despite, possibly, a naive assumption that we take the subjects of study for granted and that curriculum planning merely involves finding ways to teach these subjects effectively, the curriculum developer must constantly assume a critical posture on what is taught and must examine the assumptions, implicit and explicit, that underlie including these studies in the school curriculum.

- In any such consideration of why we teach something, we are bound to take into account not just the thing to be taught but *who* is taught. Therefore, this question involves not merely why we teach something but to whom and under what circumstances knowledge gets distributed.

- Because the way we approach teaching any knowledge inevitably affects what knowledge gets conveyed, the study of curriculum includes a set of rules that governs teaching the things to be studied. A common outcome of curric

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

ulum development, then, is the notion that we should teach *such and such to so and so in this way*.

● A further concern of the curriculum field has been how the components of the curriculum, however defined, are interrelated. Curriculum developers want things like history and science and foreign language to be taught "well," but beyond that criterion of effectiveness, they would like to think of these relatively independent studies as coming together ultimately into an integrated whole—a whole that we tend to regard as what it means to be educated in the modern world.

These four dimensions of systematic curriculum development become critical, not simply as a way of defining the field of study called curriculum as it has evolved during the 20th century, but as a way of laying to rest a common misconception about the field. This misconception takes the form of assuming that curriculum development is a relatively neutral, technical activity, that is, we often assume that curriculum development consists of using well-established, standardized means to accomplish certain agreed-upon ends. Although the common tendency in a technological society is to treat problems as if they were amenable to a standard technique, curriculum problems remain resistant to this approach. Like educational theory generally, all the important problems of curriculum include a value component. As Ernest Nagel says, to ignore "the presence of this value component of educational theory, certainly would be to discuss *Hamlet* without taking into account the Prince of Denmark."<sup>5</sup> The questions that are central to the curriculum field—why certain things should be taught, who should get what knowledge, what rules should govern teaching school subjects, and how the components of the curriculum should be interrelated—are all value questions. Curriculum development requires sophistication, judgment, and intelligence and only secondarily technical skill.

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<sup>5</sup>Ernest Nagel, "Philosophy of Science and Educational Theory," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 7 (Fall 1959): 16

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