Personal Theory

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# Introduction

Since the birth of curriculum with the publication of Franklin Bobbitt’s *The Curriculum* in 1918*,* there have been numerous contributions to the field of curriculum. An understanding of the relationship between curriculum and politics, race, and gender provides greater insight into the evolution of curriculum. Curriculum has evolved in response to historical developments, religious movements, social issues, and politics.

Through a study of the history of curriculum and a review of literature, I am defining my personal theory of curriculum. Hewitt (2006) describes curriculum as dynamic, powerful, and serving many purposes. While curriculum serves many purposes, I feel it has three primary functions. As my personal definition, I believe curriculum should educate, provide professional preparation, and cultivate moral character.

My personal theory of curriculum includes many pieces from the contributions of curriculum theorists. Moving beyond the definition of curriculum as “what we teach and why we teach” involves an understanding of these many contributions.

# Literature Review

The nation’s public education system should prepare students for higher education or a technical trade. Curriculum allows school systems to achieve this goal. Three themes emerged in my study of curriculum theory as I sought to define my personal theory of curriculum.

## Educate

I believe the primary purpose of curriculum is to educate members of our society. The curriculum offered through the nation’s school systems allows for a presentation of standardized material. Curriculum identifies the information society has deemed important for every child to know. Members of society should possess critical thinking skills, the ability to work collaboratively, and communication skills. Educators should integrate opportunities for application within the curriculum to test these skills.

### Critical Thinking

Beyond facts and figures, the curriculum must prepare children how to reason and how to choose from competing facts and differing ideas. Eisner believes the purpose of education is to teach young people to think for themselves and find meaning in the different modes of cognition. Eisner (1990) believed a creative curriculum should provide students with activities which:

1. Teach important ideas or skills
2. Are intellectually challenging and stimulate higher order thinking
3. Are presented in various forms (not only text)
4. Have connections with other areas within and outside of school
5. Provide teachers with multiple options for delivery

Dewey (1902) advised “let the child’s nature fulfill its own destiny” (p. 31). Critical thinking skills are a vital component as we prepare young people to function in society. According to the National Education Association (n.d.), “critical thinking skills are essential for many adult activities and are especially necessary for functioning in a free, self-governing society that depends on cooperation, compromise, and consensus” (p. 5).

### Collaboration

Lev Vygotsky’s educational theory proposed learning as a social process. Collaboration brings together knowledge, skills, and abilities. Collaboration requires individuals to learn to listen to one another, ask good questions, and mesh individual strengths. Teaching children the value of collaboration where they understand the benefits of shared responsibility, learn to depend on their peers, and rely on one another’s strengths is a necessary skill to function in today’s workplace. The corporate world has embraced collaboration as a means to compete in the global market place.

Miel (1962) emphasized the teacher’s responsibility in providing opportunities for students to work cooperatively with other students. She encouraged teachers to utilize cooperative learning within their classrooms. Failures provide opportunities for evaluation and the creation of solutions which can enhance future cooperative learning experiences. Miel (1962) identifies the concerns of educators with group work while promoting and encouraging educators to utilize cooperative learning experiences within their classroom.

In addition to collaboration in the classroom, there should be opportunities for collaboration between schools, universities, parents, teachers, and other agencies. Through collaboration, Lieberman (1992) believed there are opportunities to create “scholars of practice” through school-university partnerships with “academics who work with people in schools, building trust through continuous interaction, creating dialogue on topics of substance, and organizing shared work” (p. 10). Collaboration brings together the knowledge, skills, and abilities of school personnel and universities to learn from one another, build relationships, and change or rethink frameworks.

### Communication skills

Communication skills are essential skills for graduates to possess. Individuals must be able to communicate effectively to express themselves in written and verbal form. Identified as one of the top skills needed in today’s workplace (Robles, 2010), communication skills are vital in every aspect of life.

### Application

The curriculum should provide opportunities to practice solving problems and making decisions similar to the real world. Dewey (1902) conveys learning is active. The abstractions, generalizations, and classifications gleaned from active experimentation in an environment created by the educator gives meaning to learning. Students should be challenged and presented with real world situations to test their ability to think critically, collaborate, and communicate.

## Professional Preparation

Curriculum should cultivate the skills necessary for students to either pursue a higher education or join the workforce. Students pursuing higher education should have the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to support themselves outside of the classroom. According to ACT (2013), “many students do not persist in college to degree completion because they are ill-prepared for college and require remedial coursework” (p. 2).

With the increase in global competition, advances in technology, and the variety of jobs requiring unique skill sets, advanced education or technical training is necessary. I am a supporter of technical education programs. Ideally, every student, even those planning to enroll in higher education institutions, should graduate high school with a technical skill.

## Cultivation of Moral Character

I support Casey’s (as cited in Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2008) belief that “the ethical, moral, and religious (in the broadest sense) dimensions of education have never been, and indeed cannot be, excluded from our schools” (p. 606). While I personally support God and the Bible in schools, I understand and respect differing opinions in the religious debate. Without integrating a religious component in schools, I believe curriculum should teach morals and social responsibility. I believe education should “shape a democratic society rooted in justice, social responsibility, creativity, interdependence, multiculturalism, ad community solidarity” (Pinar et al., 2008, p. 633).

Kliebard (1986) believed the changing social role in schools changed the educational center of gravity. The shift moved from the “tangible presence of the teacher to the remote knowledge and values incarnate in the curriculum” (p. 1).

Hartshorne and May believed moral education in the schools was ineffective as moral character was developed at home. Kohlberg challenged Hartshorne and May’s beliefs with research. Kohlberg (1966) determined “ego strength,” comprised of the ability to predict consequences and choose a greater remote reward, predicted a child’s behavior. Kohlberg believed honesty was a result of the child’s needs, the group’s values, and the demands of the situation.

Through research, Kohlberg (1966) found it took longer for children to reach a level of moral maturity than originally determined by previous researchers. He found six stages of moral judgment considering punishment and obedience. A child’s reaction to a moral/ethical dilemma was a result of which stage of moral judgment they reside. While noting the important role of the home, Kohlberg believed it was possible to stimulate moral development within the schools.

Kohlberg (1966) believed there should be opportunities for students to experience situations which tested their morals. He recommended teachers assist students in attaining the next level of moral maturity by presenting “moral dilemmas” where students determine and justify the best course of action to solve the dilemma.

In addition to an academic view, Franklin Bobbitt (1918) proposed education consider a social view. He urged educators to agree upon a method for the development of curriculum even though they may not agree upon the details. Bobbitt believed the curriculum should include experiences in and out of school. In his view, curriculum should be purposefully directed to promote desirable qualities for the formation of adult members in society.

# Structure

I firmly believe curriculum should be structured. There should be clearly defined content deemed important to prepare students for higher education or careers. There should be a purpose for each educational activity and experience with a means of assessment. The design of activities and learning experiences should include ample opportunities to learn and complement the various learning styles to ensure success.

Bruner (1966) believed learning consisted of leading students through a sequence designed to initiate problem solving. There is no sequence applicable to all learners as the appropriate sequence depends upon the student’s past learning, stage of development, nature of development, and individual differences. The ultimate goal is to make the learner self-sufficient. Bruner believed the development of curriculum should be prepared jointly with the subject expert, teacher, and psychologist. In Bruner’s spiral curriculum, there is a revisiting of topics. With each repetition the material there is an increasing level of difficulty. Spiral curriculum promotes reinforcement, a move from simple to complex, integration, logical sequence, higher level objectives, and flexibility (Harden & Samper, 1999). Spiral curriculum moves from simple to complex and concrete to abstract (Hewitt, 2006).

Tyler (1949) believed teachers must have a clear understanding of goals and explained “educational objectives become the criteria by which materials are selected, content is outlined, instructional procedures are developed and tests and examinations are developed” (p. 52). Tyler’s Rationale (1949) found four questions as the rational for developing curriculum:

1. What educational purpose should the school seek to attain?
2. What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes?
3. How can these educational experiences be effectively organized?
4. How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained?

Tyler’s Rationale appealed to the field of curriculum as it “promised order, organization, rationality, error correction, political neutrality, expertise, and progress” (Pinar et al., 2008, p. 486). Tyler sought to identify what was to be evaluated and to place in measurable terms to determine the effect on learning.

Bloom (1956), a structuralist, created a taxonomy of educational objectives by creating three domains: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. Major categories are identified for each domain with illustrative objectives and specific learning outcomes for each category (Linn, Miller, & Gronlund (1995). The taxonomy “1) indicates how teachers differentiate among student behaviors, 2) it is logical and internally consistent, 3) it communicates contemporary psychological knowledge; and 4) the taxonomy is descriptive, conveying educational objectives neutrally” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman, 2008, p. 487).

# Role of the Teacher

Sizer (1984) describes today’s classroom as complex requiring the teacher to keep a sense of order, have a clear understanding of the art of teaching, and a firm knowledge of the subject matter. From the literature review, I firmly believe teachers should contribute to the curriculum. Teachers have legitimate power as a result of their positions.

### Contribution to Curriculum

Research indicates the role of the teacher is limited in the curriculum. Michael Apple (1990) believes control of the curriculum has been centralized with a “de-skilling of teachers and of **curriculum** workers, a separation of conception from execution as planning is removed from the local level, and a severe intensification of educators' work as more and more has to be done in less and less time” (p. 48 ).

Educators should have opportunities to “interact and have conversations around standards, theory, and classroom activities” (Richardson, 1990, p. 16). Schwab emphasized the practical. He believed theory should not be the focus of school reform, rather issues could be resolved by teachers through problem-solving to better understand interactions (Hewitt, 2006). Schwab did not believe in further development of curriculum theories. He was an advocate of educators playing an active role in the development process.

## Power

Research indicates teachers have power in some areas while they lack power in other areas. According to Apple, the authors and publishers of textbooks have gained control of the curriculum with requests for standardized, grade-specific texts. Decisions about the nation’s curriculum have been made by those with political and cultural power.

Sizer (1984) refers to teaching as a craft requiring “complexity and subtlety” (p. 4). Pagano (1990) explains teachers must decide what to teach, how to teach, and how to interpret the texts used for teaching. However, teachers have ethical choices to make and knowledge is power. The belief has been if a teacher is educating, the teacher is engaged in worthwhile teaching.

Goodlad advocates schools are the unit for change. He recommends schools create networks to offer support and assistance. A good principal is typically found in good schools. According to Goodlad “better preparation of principals and teachers, along with help and time for designing school programs at the site, are necessary ingredients of school improvement” (Quinby, 1985, p. 18). Goodlad believes topics should not be the core of education and emphasizes “topics should be only the means, not the goals, of instruction” (p.18). To improve schools, there must be “better preparation of principals and teachers, along with help and time for designing school programs at the site” (p. 19).

## Nurturer

Teachers serve in the parental role during the school day as they nurture children. The home life for many children is pleasant and supportive while for others it is not. Grumet seeks to show how a women’s experience with reproduction and nurturance transcend into the curricular forms we see in public education. She argues “what is most fundamental to our lives as men and women sharing a moment on this planet is the process and experience of reproducing ourselves” (p. 4). Grumet sees a relationship between nurturing a child and educating the next generation. Many teachers fill the role of nurturer for their students.

# Conclusion

In my research, I found a textbook entitled, “Curriculum Theory: Conflicting Visions and Enduring Concerns”. This title provides a clear description of the current state of curriculum theory. Despite philosophical contributions from numerous curriculum theorists and political and social influences, curriculum continues to be highly debated and uncertain.

Curriculum plays a powerful role by preparing young people for their future. Thus, it is imperative children have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to prepare them for success. Whether they choose to pursue a higher education or immediately join the workforce, there are certain knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to function effectively in today’s society. Curriculum should prepare them well for their future endeavors. Despite the abundance of curriculum theory, I see the primary purposes of curriculum as educating, providing professional preparation, and cultivating moral character.

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