3

Alternative Curriculum Conceptions and Designs

M. FRANCES KLEIN

FOCUSING QUESTIONS

1. ***What is the measured curriculum?***
2. ***In what ways do alternative curriculum conceptions and designs influence curriculum delivery and evaluation?***
3. ***What common ideas do technological, cognitive processes, and academic rationalism embrace?***
4. ***How do social reconstructionism and self-actualization differ?***
5. ***How do the means-end, naturalistic observation, educational connoisseurship, and case study forms of evaluation differ?***
6. ***Which type of curriculum conception and design do you prefer? Why?***

The field of curriculum is not without its critics. Schwab (1978) has called the study of curriculum moribund and Jackson (1981) has even questioned the existence of curriculum as a field of study. Most curriculum scholars, however, are more confident about the existence of the curriculum field since they have spent their careers in an effort to conceptualize it and study those practices which are called curriculum. Although some scholars may debate whether curriculum studies exist and if so, how to conceptualize them, few practitioners would question the existence or importance of curriculum. Curriculum is the substance of schooling—the primary reason why people attend school.

Many educational resources go to direct and support the curriculum. Countless committee meetings are held to develop it; teachers are hired, trained, and supervised in order to implement it; administrators are exhorted to provide curriculum leadership as their primary role; materials are purchased or created; learning resource centers are built to support the curriculum; and educational researchers seek bases for improving it.

In the comparatively short time since its generally recognized "birth" with the publication of Bobbitt's book, *The Curriculum* (1918), the growth of the field has been slow and difficult. Curriculum scholars have debated significant ideas and proposed changes, but have not always addressed themselves to what difference their ideas make to the practitioner. Little wonder, then, that the practice of curriculum continues along a single strand of development with few alternative ideas considered.

Tyler's syllabus, *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (1950), was selected by the leadership group, Professors of Curriculum, as one of two publications which has had the most influence over the field of curriculum (Shane, 1981).[1] In the Tyler syllabus, concepts and procedures are

spelled out as a way to view curriculum and they have been applied in diverse situations all over the world in curriculum development efforts. Some curriculum scholars owe their careers to their refinements and modifications of the Tyler rationale.

Tyler identified three data sources which must be used in curriculum development: society, student, and subject matter. These three data sources have historically stimulated alternative conceptions of curriculum and the development of different curriculum designs. Scholars have long recognized the importance of the three data sources, but too often missed Tyler's message—that the use of one of the data sources alone is inadequate in developing curricula. A comprehensive curriculum must use all three.

Current curriculum practice and research focus almost exclusively on just one of these data sources, subject matter. Curricula have been developed using what Eisner and Vallance (1974) call the technological conception. Referred to here as the measured curriculum, it has emerged into dominance over all other alternative conceptions and designs.

THE MEASURED CURRICULUM

The measured curriculum is familiar to all educators. Behavioral objectives, time on task, sequential learning, positive reinforcement, direct instruction, achievement testing, mastery in skills and content, and teacher accountability are essential concepts used in practice and research. The measured curriculum should neither be condemned nor used exclusively to direct curriculum practice and research. It must be recognized for its strengths and limitations. It is compatible with some of the major educational outcomes valued by society—a store of knowledge about the world, command of the basic processes of communication, and exposure to new content areas. But this conception and design of curriculum cannot accomplish everything students are expected to learn.

Most curriculum scholars have long advocated the use of different designs for a school's curriculum; subject-centered, societal-centered, and individual-centered designs are the most commonly discussed. Unless alternatives to the technological, subject-matter-based curriculum (i.e., the measured curriculum) are used, some of the time-honored and persistently stated educational outcomes will not be accomplished.

OTHER CONCEPTIONS

Eisner and Vallance (1974) identified four other conceptions of curriculum in addition to the technological process: cognitive processes, self-actualization, social reconstruction, and academic rationalism. These four conceptions propose something the technological process does not—desired outcomes and a focus on the substance of curriculum. Two of the conceptions of curriculum, cognitive processes and academic rationalism, are often planned and implemented through the use of the technological process and a subject matter design. The other two, self-actualization and social reconstruction, require different curriculum designs and different concepts and procedures from the measured curriculum for planning and implementation.

Cognitive Processes and Academic Rationalism

Most similar to and compatible with the concepts and procedures of the measured curriculum are academic rationalism and cognitive processes. Academic rationalism advocates that the curriculum be based on the storehouse of knowledge which has enabled humankind to advance civilization. This storehouse is defined as organized subject matter in the form of the academic disciplines. The subject-centered curriculum design and the efficient technological process of curriculum building are compatible with this conception. It has been used well in the past and continues to have strong and prestigious advocates—Adler in *The Paideia Proposal* (1982), for example. Classroom practices and research are familiar to all when they are based on this conception. It is a form of the measured curriculum.

Cognitive processes as a conception of curriculum is less tied to specific content than is academic rationalism. Cognitive processes are thought to be "content-free" in the sense that they are generalizable from one subject area to another. The concept emphasizes the ability to think, reason, and engage in problem-solving activities. The specific content used is somewhat less important than the processes to be learned. This conception, too, has its strong proponents—Bruner (1961) and Bloom (1956), for example. Many curricula include this conception of outcomes as a major part of their intent and substance.

Curriculum development in both of these conceptions occurs in a similar way. The technological approach of the Tyler rationale (1950) is commonly used as a basis for planning and implementing curricula. The subject-centered design also is commonly employed, using concepts such as behavioral objectives, sequential organization of content, time on task, appropriate practice, and achievement tests. However, teachers using the cognitive processes conception might operate more from the information processing models of teaching as conceptualized by Joyce and Weil (1980), while academic rationalists might more often employ behavioristic models.

Social Reconstruction and Self-Actualization

The last two conceptions of curriculum, social reconstruction and self-actualization, are quite different and require different approaches to their development. The concepts from the measured curriculum are not automatically transferable to research and practice based on these conceptions.

Social reconstructionists look to society as a basis for the substance of curriculum. In their view, the problems and dilemmas of society are what ought to be studied by students with the intent of creating a more just, equitable, and humane society. Students must be involved in studying how obstacles can be overcome so that a more ideal society can be created. This becomes the content of the curriculum. Students are not to learn about them simply through a subject-centered design, however. The traditional textbook coverage in sociology or political science is not what these curriculum advocates favor. They want the students out in the community, using original sources, interviewing people, formulating solutions, testing hypotheses, and solving real problems—not just reading about them.

This design is societal centered rather than subject centered. The disciplines are used only as they relate to the problems being studied. Science is not studied as science nor history as history, but both subjects may be essential to understanding and developing possible resolutions to a local pollution problem. If so, students are expected to draw upon both disciplines. Through this conception and design of curriculum, students learn how to learn. They attack real problems, become meaningfully involved as citizens of the society, and begin to critically examine and help mold a better society.

Traditional concepts and processes from the measured curriculum are not applicable in practice for social reconstruction. No defined body of content can be spelled out in behavioral objectives. Time on task cannot be tracked easily since schooling is extended beyond the classroom. Time may even be "wasted" in tracking down important resources. Efficiency is not inherent to this design. Achievement also takes on a different definition, relating not to a body of prescribed content or skills but rather to how effectively the problem was studied and potentially resolved.

Testing as a form of evaluation is not applicable since each student or group of students may have studied different problems, used different resources, and posed different solutions. Other forms of evaluation emphasizing process more than content must be used. Students must be more involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of such a curriculum. In a social reconstructionist approach, curriculum development is not conducted prior to classroom interaction as in the measured curriculum. The curriculum must be developed jointly with the students.

The planning and implementation of a social reconstructionist's curriculum using a societal-

based design would be distinctively different from other conceptions and designs. Rather than using behavioral objectives, practice would be guided by goals or general objectives such as those proposed by Zahorik (1976) or by problem-solving objectives as suggested by Eisner (1979). The use of general objectives such as learning how to study a problem or studying about discrimination, or of problem-solving objectives such as investigating the control of pollutants within the community or how the school could be a more democratic institution, allows for greater diversity in what is learned by students. All students are not expected to have the same experience or learn the same content. General objectives or problem-solving objectives open up the parameters for teaching and learning.

Classroom activities and evaluation procedures in social reconstruction would be developed through the use of criteria as proposed by Raths (1971) instead of according to the concepts of appropriate practice and achievement tests. Rather than activities which primarily provide appropriate practice for the behavior and content of the objectives, activities would be planned which permit students to make informed choices and reflect on their consequences; take risks of success or failure; and share the development, implementation, and evaluation of a plan. Evaluation procedures would focus on the provision of such activities and what is learned through them, not on the mastery of content or skills.

Teacher accountability would shift from a focus on how well students learn content to such considerations as processes used, community involvement achieved, and the diversity of relevant resources available to and used by the students. Learning in this design would not be sequential or like a stairstep as in the measured curriculum, but more like Eisner's (1979) spider-web model of learning. Teachers would draw most often from the social interaction family of teacher models as conceptualized by Joyce and Weil (1980).

Curriculum as self-actualization is even further removed from the traditional curriculum practices and research of the measured curriculum. In this conception, students become the curriculum developers, selecting for study what they are interested in, intrigued by, and curious about. The curriculum is not preplanned by adults, but evolves as a student or a group of students and their teacher explore something of interest. Growth is viewed as the process of becoming a self-actualizing person, not learning a body of content or a set of cognitive processes or studying the problems of society. Content is important to the extent that it is relevant and meaningful to the individual student, not as it is defined by someone else. The design becomes individual centered with the role of the student rather than that of the teacher being dominant.

In this conception and design, traditional concepts guiding practice are incompatible. Objectives are too directing; time on task becomes unmanageable as students pursue different ideas, at different paces, and in different ways; achievement testing is impossible when students learn different things; and appropriate practice becomes idiosyncratically defined based on students' own interests. The classroom becomes an enriched, stimulating environment to challenge and appeal to students, an active, noisy place where students interact with each other as needed, and an extension of a learning resource laboratory with diverse and plentiful materials. Students and teachers become co-learners embarked on a study plan of their own making.

For this conception of curriculum as self-actualization, new concepts and procedures must be developed and legitimatized. Eisner's (1979) concept of expressive outcomes seems uniquely fitted to this conception and design, and educational criticism and connoisseurship are better suited as a mode of evaluation (Eisner, 1979). The personal family of teaching models would be most representative of how teachers and students would interact (Joyce & Weil, 1980).

Macdonald, Wolfson, and Zaret (1973) propose learning organized around a continuous cycle of exploring, integrating, and transcending. They also identify self-evaluation as an important aspect of this conception. Accountability according to them should be social accountability. Is the school exemplifying the values which the society desires

to foster within young people? Other compatible concepts will need to be developed through an exploration of this design in practice, an opportunity curriculum workers do not frequently have. From such a curriculum students learn to develop their unique talents and interests, to value learning as a process, to become even more creative, curious, and imaginative, and to become more integrated, humane, caring human beings.

NEEDED CHANGES IN CURRICULUM RESEARCH

The procedures and concepts used in research help determine what is "seen" in the curriculum. When researchers structure interviews, questionnaires, and observation around behavioral objectives, time on task, appropriate practice, and achievement testing, those are the concepts which are documented. Rather than rely exclusively on those concepts used in the practices of the measured curriculum (upon which much of the current research on curriculum is based), alternative approaches to curriculum research must be applied for different conceptions and designs.

More naturalistic observations in classrooms for the self-actualization conception and individual-based design are needed. New approaches to determining individual perceptions of growth and relating those to classroom practices would be one way to proceed. Eisner's (1979) concepts of educational connoisseurship and criticism seem to have considerable compatibility and already offer an alternative approach to traditional curriculum research. Case studies of classrooms using the social reconstruction conception and societal-centered design may be needed as research documentation.

However the research methodologies and constructs are developed and used in relation to the alternative approaches to curriculum, they must honor and be compatible with the unique expected outcomes of each and the different concepts upon which practice is based. To do otherwise is to destroy the potential any alternative in curriculum conception and design has to enhance the growth of students. This undoubtedly will require the use of ideas other than our traditional research concepts such as validity, reliability, objectivity, and generalizability.

Research methodology and the type of research study conducted must accommodate the alternative shifts in curriculum conceptions and designs which are developed to guide practice. Researchers must learn to operationalize new concepts, to ask different questions, to view curriculum from different conceptions. The new research concepts and procedures must be compatible with the practices and reflective of the differing educational outcomes each design will encourage.

CONCLUSION

For the purposes of this chapter, the placement of basic concepts and procedures has been perhaps too narrow and somewhat rigid in order to make the case for using alternative concepts and processes for different conceptions and designs. It may well be that several concepts have applicability in more than one conception and design. Only as they are given rigorous study in research and practice will this become clear, however.

The extent to which schooling can accommodate these designs—and newer ones being developed—is a matter for debate and experimentation. However, much more can be accomplished with alternative conceptions and designs than is even thought about now. Curriculum does not have to be *either* one conception *or* another. With the use of varying conceptions and designs in each classroom, schools might well become much more attractive, challenging, and relevant places for students. And schooling as a process may become more responsive to the needs and desires of both the individual student and society.

The field of study called curriculum is alive, but not as healthy as it might be. Its health could be enhanced by enriching the diet currently restricted to the measured curriculum with more diverse nutrients from the storehouse of alternative conceptions and designs. This enrichment is a fundamental task to which future curriculum workers must address themselves.

ENDNOTE

1. The other most influential book was Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916).

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which type of curriculum conception is most relevant to contemporary education? Which is the most irrelevant?
2. Which method of evaluation is most relevant to contemporary education?
3. Suppose you are the curriculum director and can determine the curriculum for your school. Which type of curriculum conception and method of evaluation would guide your selection? Would you use a single approach to curriculum design and evaluation?
4. What is the relationship between types of curriculum conceptions and educational philosophies?
5. How might schools become more relevant and challenging places for students?