1   What Is Curriculum?

Introduction

Defining the word *curriculum* is no easy matter. Perhaps the most common definition derives from the word's Latin root, which means 'racecourse'. Indeed, for many students, the school curriculum is a race to be run, a series of obstacles or hurdles (subjects) to be passed. It is important to keep in mind that schools in Western civilization have been heavily influenced since the fourth century B.C. by the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle and that the word *curriculum* has been used historically to describe the subjects taught during the classical period of Greek civilization. The interpretation of the word *curriculum* broadened in the twentieth century to include subjects other than the classics. Today, school documents, newspaper articles, committee reports, and many academic textbooks refer to any and all subjects offered or prescribed as 'the curriculum of the school'.

Consequently, it is not surprising that writers such as Longstreet and Shane (1993) consider that 'curriculum is an historical accident – it has not been developed to accomplish a clear set of purposes. Rather, it has evolved as a response to the increasing complexity of educational decision making' (p. 7).

Some Definitions of Curriculum

Many writers advocate their own preferred definition of *curriculum*, which emphasizes other meanings or connotations, particularly those the term has taken on recently. According to Portelli (1987), more than 120 definitions of the term appear in the professional literature devoted to curriculum, presumably because authors are concerned about either delimiting what the term means or establishing new meanings that have become associated with it.

Hlebowitsh (1993) criticizes commentators in the curriculum field who focus 'only on certain facets of early curriculum thought while ignoring others' (p. 2).

We need to be watchful, therefore, about definitions that capture only a few of the various characteristics of curriculum (Toombs and Tierney, 1993), especially those that are partisan or biased. Portelli (1987), drawing on a metaphor developed by Soltis (1978), notes, 'Those who look for the definition of curriculum are like a sincere but misguided centaur hunter, who even with a

fully provisioned safari and a gun kept always at the ready, nonetheless will never require the services of a taxidermist' (p. 364).

The incompleteness of any definition notwithstanding, certain definitions of the term can provide insights about common emphases and characteristics within the general idea of curriculum. Consider, for example, the following definitions of curriculum.

- Curriculum is the 'permanent' subjects that embody essential knowledge.
- Curriculum is those subjects that are most useful for contemporary living.
- Curriculum is all planned learnings for which the school is responsible.
- Curriculum is the totality of learning experiences so that students can attain general skills and knowledge at a variety of learning sites.
- Curriculum is what the students construct from working with the computer and its various networks, such as the Internet.
- Curriculum is the questioning of authority and the searching for complex views of human situations.

Definition 1

Curriculum is such 'permanent' subjects as grammar, reading, logic, rhetoric, mathematics, and the greatest books of the Western world that best embody essential knowledge.

An example is the National Curriculum enacted in the United Kingdom in 1988, which prescribed the curriculum in terms of three core and seven foundational subjects, including specific content and specific goals for student achievement in each subject.

Problems Posed by the Definition

This definition suggests that the curriculum is limited to only a few academic subjects. It assumes that what is studied is what is learned. It does not address questions such as: Does the state of knowledge change? If so, shouldn't the subjects making up the curriculum also change? What makes learning such subjects essential? Goodson and Marsh (1996) point out that the National Curriculum in the United Kingdom is simply a reconstitution of the subjects included in the Secondary Regulations of 1904, suggesting that 'historical amnesia allows curriculum reconstruction to be presented as curriculum revolution' (p. 157). Griffith (2000) contends that a knowledge-based curriculum such as the National Curriculum does not exist independently of space and time. It should not be considered ahistorically, for it is neither neutral, factual, nor value free.

Definition 2

Curriculum is those subjects that are most useful for living in contemporary society.

The subjects that make up this curriculum are usually chosen in terms of major present-day issues and problems within society, but the definition itself does not preclude individual students from making their own choices about which subjects are most useful.

Problems posed by the Definition

This definition seems to imply that what is contemporary has more value than what is long-lasting. It encourages schools and students to accommodate themselves to society as it exists instead of attempting to improve it. It leaves open questions such as: What accounts for stability in the curriculum? What is useful knowledge? If useful practical skills are increasingly emphasized, what becomes of intellectual development?

Definition 3

Curriculum is all planned learnings for which the school is responsible.

'Planned learnings' can be long written documents specifying content, shorter lists of intended learning outcomes, or simply the general ideas of teachers about what students should know. Exponents of curriculum as a plan include Saylor, Alexander, and Lewis (1981), Beauchamp (1981), and Posner (1998).

Problems Posed by the Definition

This definition seems to assume that what is studied is learned. It may limit 'planned learnings' to those that are easiest to achieve, not those that are most desirable. It does not address questions such as: On what basis does the school select and take responsibility for certain learnings while excluding others? Is it possible for teachers to separate the ends of instruction from the means? Are unplanned, but actual, learnings excluded from the curriculum?

Definition 4

Curriculum is the totality of learning experiences provided to students so that they can attain general skills and knowledge at a variety of learning sites.

Emphasis is on learning rather than teaching, especially learning skills and knowledge at sites other than schools. The assumption is that all sites – including workplace sites – can be conducive to learning general knowledge. This approach to curriculum has been heavily publicized in a number of countries recently and is usually supported for economic reasons by business organiza-

tions, other vocationally oriented groups, and advocates of explicit competency standards.

Problems Posed by the Definition

This definition usually leads to a narrow technical-functionalist approach to curriculum, requiring that unduly large numbers of outcomes and high levels of specificity be identified. Walker (1994) and Cairns (1992) are critical of the uniformity and the focus on minimum standards the definition encourages. Moore (2000) points out that the economic well-being of a nation depends on much besides vocational training.

Definition 5

Curriculum is what the student constructs from working with the computer and its various networks, such as the Internet.
Obviously, this is a modern definition. It assumes that computers are everywhere – in the home, school, and office – and students, perceiving them as part of the natural landscape, are thriving. Although teachers have been slow in developing computer skills, many are now becoming involved. Advocates argue that the new computing technologies have created a culture for increasingly active learning; students can construct their own meanings as they locate sources on the Internet, explore issues and communicate with others. Social skills are also developed through chat groups, conferences, and e-mail communications.

Problems Posed by the Definition

Although some writers such as Vine *et al.* (2000) contend that schools in the near future will change drastically as students access more electronic resources from the home, others such as Reid (2000) and Westbury (2000) believe that schools will remain long-enduring institutions. Budin (1999) reminds us that technology is not a neutral tool. What is now available on the Internet, for example, is not necessarily what should be on it or what will be on it tomorrow. Furthermore, not all students have the same level of access to the Internet, and the learning it promotes may prove to be far more passive than now commonly believed. We should, therefore, be wary of excessive claims about active or constructivist learning made possible by computers.

Definition 6

Curriculum is the questioning of authority and the searching for complex views of human situations.
This definition is consistent with the ancient Socratic maxim 'The unexamined life is not worth living'. However, it may also overly encourage rejection of what is, making it a postmodernist definition. The term *postmodernist* implies opposition to widely used ('modern') values and practices. Hence, postmodernists are disparate in their own views, usually sharing only a desire to challenge what is modern, a readiness to accept the unaccepted, and a willingness to conceptualize new ways of thinking.

Problems Posed by the Definition

Postmodernism reduced simply to the process of questioning may not be helpful in identifying in practice how students should spend their time and energy. Although many authors are enthusiastic about the general potential of postmodernist thinking (Slattery, 1995; Atkinson, 2000; Parker, 1997), others (Barrow, 1999) contend that it is overly general, vague, and confused. It is subject to the charge of relativism. Moore (2000) contends there is a fatal, internal contradiction among those postmodernists who state that all truth is relative, when this statement itself would have to be nonrelative in order to be true.

Characteristics of Curriculum

Some curriculum experts, such as Goodlad (1979), contend that an analysis of definitions is a useful starting point for examining the field of curriculum. Other writers argue that there are important concepts or characteristics that need to be considered and which give some insights into how particular value orientations have evolved and why.

Walker (1990) argues that the fundamental concepts of curriculum include:

- content: which may be depicted in terms of concept maps, topics, and themes, all of which are abstractions which people have invested and named;
- purpose: usually categorized as intellectual, social and personal; often divided into superordinate purposes; stated purposes are not always reliable indicators of actions;
- organization: planning is based upon scope and sequence (order of presence over time); can be tightly organized or relatively open-ended.

Other writers such as Beane *et al.* (1986) produce principles of curriculum but they are more value-oriented and less generic. For example, they list five major principles about curriculum:

- concern with the experiences of learners;
- making decisions about both content and process;
- making decisions about a variety of issues and topics;
- involving many groups;
- decision-making at many levels.

It is evident that these authors have a particular conception of curriculum; perhaps a combination of student- and society-centred. Inevitably, if specific principles are given a high priority, then a particular conception of curriculum emerges. Longstreet and Shane (1993) refer to four major conceptions of curriculum:

- society-oriented curriculum: the purpose of schooling is to serve society;
- student-centred curriculum: the student is the crucial source of all curriculum;
- knowledge-centred curriculum: knowledge is the heart of curriculum;
- eclectic curriculum: various compromises are possible including mindless eclecticism!

The conceptions or orientations of curriculum produced by Eisner and Vallance (1974) are often cited in literature, namely:

- a cognitive process orientation: cognitive skills applicable to a wide range of intellectual problems;
- technological orientation: to develop means to achieve prespecified ends;
- self-actualization orientation: individual students discover and develop their unique identities;
- social reconstructionist orientation: schools must be an agency of social change;
- academic rationalist orientation: to use and appreciate the ideas and works of the various disciplines.

It is interesting to note that Vallance (1986) modified these orientations 12 years later by deleting 'self-actualization' and adding 'personal success' (pursuing a specific, practical end) and a 'curriculum for personal commitment' (pursuing learning for its inherent rewards).

These conceptions of curriculum are useful to the extent that they remind educators of some value orientations that they may be following, whether directly or indirectly. Yet others, such as Pinar *et al.* (1995), argue that these conceptions are stereotypes and are of little value.

Who Is Involved in Curriculum?

Curriculum workers are many and include school-based personnel such as teachers, principals, and parents and university-based specialists, industry and community groups, and government agencies and politicians.

Jackson (1992) suggests that a large number of those working in the curriculum field are involved in serving the daily and technical needs of those who work in schools. This has been the traditional role over the decades where the focus has been upon curriculum development for school contexts.

Pinar *et al.* (1995) refer to the 'shifting domain of curriculum development as politicians, textbook companies, and subject-matter specialists in the university, rather than school practitioners and university professors of curriculum, exercise leadership and control over curriculum development' (p. 41). It is certainly the case in most OECD (developed) countries that a wider range of interest groups are now involved in curriculum development (Ross, 2000).

Curriculum in the twenty-first century is indeed moving in many directions and some would assert that this reflects a conceptual advance (Jackson, 1992) and a more sophisticated view of the curriculum. Others would argue that curriculum as a field of study is still conceptually underdeveloped, (Goodlad and Su, 1992) and rather like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall!! (Wright, 2000).

Reflections and Issues

1. There are very divergent views about the nature of curriculum. What definition of curriculum do you support? Justify your choice.
2. Trying to clarify central concepts by proposing definitions for them has been popular in many fields (Portelli, 1987). Have these concepts and definitions proven useful in the field of curriculum?
3. 'The struggle over the definition of curriculum is a matter of social and political priorities as well as intellectual discourse' (Goodson 1988, p. 23). Reflect upon a particular period of time and analyse the initiatives, successes and failures which occurred in terms of curriculum development or policy development.
4. 'If the curriculum is to be the instrument of change in education, its meanings and operational terms must be clearer than they are currently' (Toombs and Tierney, 1993, p. 175). Discuss.
5. 'The term "social subjects" rarely occurs in the current formulations of the National Curriculum or the whole curriculum in the United Kingdom; indeed the very work "society" is notable by its infrequency.' (Campbell, 1993, p. 137) Does this indicate deficiencies in the conceptions of curriculum incorporated into the National Curriculum? Discuss.