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CURRICULUM THEORY: WHAT IT IS AND WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we discuss the importance of curriculum theory and its specialists in the current debate on school curriculum. After a short account on the evolution of the field of curriculum studies, we delve into the critique and normative aspects of curriculum theory, suggesting that these two objectives have been separated, much to the demise of both of them. Next, when defending education as a practical and specialized activity, we suggest that the curriculum theory unite both aspects and regard the curriculum as a form of specialized knowledge. Lastly, we postulate that curriculum theorists concentrate their efforts on the development of curricula that not just reproduce learning opportunities, but rather broaden them.

CURRICULUM • KNOWLEDGE • CURRICULUM THEORY

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I AM CONVINCED THAT THERE IS NO MORE CRITICAL EDUCATIONAL CRITICAL EDUCATIONAL issue today than the curriculum. To put the issue more directly we need to answer the question "what should all students know by the time they leave school?". As curriculum theorists we should have answers to such questions. After all we are the specialists on curriculum matters. This does not mean that we are the un-questioned authorities on the curriculum, far from it. But it does mean, as I see it, that we have the responsibility that goes with being specialists, to speak the truth in our field as we see it. At the same time, such questions about "what to teach in school" are only one level of enquiry for curriculum theory; the curriculum has for too long been associated only with schools. Colleges, and universities have curricula too. Curriculum theory applies to any educational institution.

Curriculum questions are far from straightforward – and this is not made easier by the fact that everyone thinks they have answers to them especially in relation to the school curriculum. Those with political power often do not recognize the authority of our specialist knowledge as curriculum specialists. This lack of recognition is partly our fault; there is little agreement among curriculum specialists about what the object of their theory should be.

First a very brief history of curriculum theory, referring to the two countries I know a little about, England and the USA. Both began with very narrow but very different forms of curriculum theory. In the

USA it was derived from the scientific management of F. W. Taylor and then applied to schools, so curriculum theorists could tell teachers what to teach as if they were manual workers – that is why most curriculum departments in American universities are named Departments of Curriculum and Instruction (see Raymond Callaghan's excellent book, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*). In England we had a quite different tradition – it was a complacent and elitist view of what should be taught in schools, known as "liberal education." It assumed first that we did not need a theory, and second that if pupils did not learn it was because they lacked intelligence.

These traditions lost much of their credibility from the 1960s and 1970s on, although the idea of schools needing to be "more efficient," like factories, is never far away in either country. However, it is hard, looking at the curriculum journals, to know what the limits of the field now are; not only *what is curriculum theory?*, but *what is not curriculum theory*.

There have been a number of developments in the field of curriculum studies, which are critical of the two early traditions:

1. The interaction between the Anglo-American traditions and the German and Northern European traditions of educational theory.
2. The development of critical curriculum theory, which led to the breakup of the early American and English traditions. In USA these were the re-conceptualists associated with Bill Pinar who draw mostly on Dewey, and the critical neo Marxists and post Marxists such as Michael Apple and Tom Popkewitz. I was shocked to see that one of this group, Jean Anyon, died recently.
3. The curriculum historians, led by my English colleague Ivor Goodson.
4. The sociologists of education, in both constructivist and realist traditions, with whom I have been associated.

I must also mention Basil Bernstein, although sadly in memory only. In my view it was he, more than anyone, in his later work, who really put curriculum theory on the map. He certainly taught me that you cannot have a curriculum theory without a theory of knowledge. We do therefore have these positive traditions to build on, even in these difficult times. Without them, curriculum theory could easily revert to its earlier technicist and elitist past or, more likely, have no future at all.

A CRITICAL ROLE AND A NORMATIVE ROLE FOR CURRICULUM THEORY

What does it mean to say that we are "curriculum specialists"? It means, I suggest, that we have two primary roles: a critical role and a normative role.

As critics, our task should be to analyze the assumptions, strengths and weaknesses of existing curricula, and the ways that the concept curriculum is used; the difficult and much debated question is what exactly should this notion of critique mean? Speaking for my own experience, one thing I have learned in the last ten years or so is that you cannot have critique without a tradition. In this way curriculum theory is not unlike music and art; it has traditions, which break up and are transformed but we cannot do without them – even anarchists have traditions. I draw my tradition from Sociology and I am glad I had to read the long texts by Durkheim and Weber without at the time really knowing why. This was my particular biography and I do not imply that Sociology is the only tradition for curriculum theory; far from it. I have learned much from psychologists, historians and philosophers, although I have never been part of their traditions; whether there is a distinct tradition and discipline of "curriculum theory" and what its basis might be is for me a question open to debate. Some curriculum theorists, particularly those in the American tradition adopt an eclectic use of theories from a wide range of sources. The relationship between the object of theory – "what is taught in schools and colleges" – and developing a theory of that object is complex. Is it, for example, a discipline of its own or does it draw on different disciplines?

WHAT IS MEANT BY SAYING CURRICULUM THEORY HAS AN INESCAPABLY NORMATIVE ROLE?

To say that curriculum theory has a *normative* role has two meanings. One refers to the rules (or norms) guiding curricular design and practice and the other to the fact that education always implies some moral values about the good person and the "good society" – in other words what are we educating for? In this presentation I am primarily concerned here with the former meaning of "normative." It refers to the implications of our analyses for what a "better curriculum" should involve. What is clear to me is that a *normative* view of curriculum theory becomes a form of technicism – telling teachers what to do – if it is separated from its *critical* role.

Likewise, it is difficult to see the purpose of a critical role for curriculum theory that is detached from any normative implications – critiques cannot be ends in themselves. In my country, the government is making big changes in the school curriculum – it is disturbing that the voice of curriculum theory is heard very little.

A glance at the history of the curriculum field suggests that critical and normative goals have been sharply separated to the detriment of both. For example, those who prescribe models for "better" curricula rarely engage with critical analyses, which might force them to examine

their assumptions. They assume that no one would seriously disagree with their prescriptions, whether they emphasize outcomes, objectives, competences, or functional skills. The assumptions underpinning such curriculum models are not seen as needing evidence or arguments to support them – they are taken for granted like people in the past treated Euclid's axioms; it is assumed that everything would collapse if they are not true. My view is that if outcomes or competences or more broadly assessment drives the curriculum, it will be unable to provide access to knowledge; knowledge is about being able to envisage alternatives whether in literature or chemistry; it can never be outcomes, skills or assessments led.

What then about a curriculum theory which adopts a critical role without feeling a need to develop its concrete implications? Critique is seen as self justifying – *speaking truth to power* is a popular phrase – and critics object when faced with the question "so what?" Foucault is very popular among critical curriculum theorists and he justified critique without following through its implications in the following words:

> I absolutely will not play the part of one who prescribes solutions. I hold that the role of the intellectual today is [...] not proposing solutions or prophesying, since by doing that one can only contribute to a given situation of power that must be criticized. (FOUCAULT, 1991, p. 157[1] apud MULLER, 2000)

The problem with Foucault's argument, as I see it, is that he assumes that alternative principles are the same as solutions. No teacher wants solutions from curriculum theory – in the sense of "being told what to teach." That is technicism and undermines teachers. However, like any profession, teachers would be isolated and lose whatever authority they have without curriculum guidelines and principles derived from curriculum theory. In other words, teachers need curriculum theory to affirm their professional authority.

A more extreme view adopted by some of those associated with the critical pedagogy tradition frees them from envisaging concrete alternatives by identifying with some hypothetical global movement of the dis-enfranchised, along the lines suggested by Hardt and Negri in their book *Empire*. "Critique for its own sake, without alternatives" is what I call such critical pedagogy, unless you call "hope in some unlikely future" an alternative.

The implication of "critiques without alternatives" is to endorse what the distinguished sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall once referred to ironically as a "curriculum of life"; in effect, unless life is itself a curriculum, this means no curriculum at all and by implication no schools either.

1 FOUCAULT, M. *Remarks on Marx*: conversations with Diccio Tombadori (R. J. Goldstein and J. Cascaito' Translation). New York: Semiotext(e), 1991.

Why then have we got this division of labor between critique and implementation or alternatives? It is not a feature of other specialist knowledge in fields like health or engineering. It is partly our own fault – to go back to an earlier point, we have not agreed what the object of our theory is or even what are the limits of our theory, and so we search for critical concepts in Philosophy, politics, and literary theory even though they have never engaged with any educational issues, let alone curricula. A recent paper in the *Journal of Curriculum Studies – JCS* – referred to this as curriculum theory's flight from the curriculum. I was sent a paper the other day about Derrida and Geography – it was an elegant and systematic "deconstruction" of Geography as having no kind of coherence – so how could you possibly teach it? The author did not follow through the logic of the argument and suggest we should stop teaching Geography – and it might have been History or Science.

But why Derrida? An undoubtedly brilliant philosopher. But does that necessarily mean he is a curriculum theorist? I don't think so. I have not read much Derrida and his texts are not easy; what I do know I owe to the interpretations of the English philosopher Christopher Norris. Derrida's project, according to Norris, was a critical de-construction of the Enlightenment tradition philosophy initiated by Kant – a fine project for a philosopher but not for a curriculum theorist; again, I don't think so. In searching through such texts, I think curriculum theory is in danger of avoiding two related but crucial issues.

The first issue is that Education is a *practical* activity like health and transport or communications. It is not like Physics or Philosophy or History – fields of enquiry that search for truth about us and the world and the universe we inhabit. Education is about doing things to and with others; pedagogy is always an authority relation (remember Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development – the gap between what the student and the teacher know), which we have to accept responsibility for – and that is where, I would argue, the curriculum comes in. Education is first and foremost concerned with enabling people to acquire knowledge that takes them beyond their experience, and they would be unlikely to acquire it if they did not go to school or college. Curriculum theory's role, I suggest, must be to analyze this knowledge – largely, it is *existing school knowledge* – and to come up with the best alternatives to existing forms that we can.

The second issue is that education is also a *specialized activity*. In the days when most people did not go to school, education was a simple matter that was undertaken by parents and older people as a natural extension of the rest of their lives. It did not require any knowledge beyond people's experience and memories of growing up. As societies became more complex and more differentiated, specialized institutions developed – schools, colleges and of course, universities –, so education, though still a *practical activity*, has become *increasingly specialized*.

Curricula are the form of this specialized educational knowledge, which largely defines the kind of education people, get. We need to understand curricula as forms of specialized knowledge so that we can develop better curricula and improve learning opportunities. It is such goals that give purpose to curriculum theory just as it is better treatment and better medicines that give purpose to medical science. So, back to the curriculum as an educational concept.

CURRICULUM AS EDUCATIONAL CONCEPT

I have increasingly come to realize that the curriculum is the single most distinctive concept that has emerged in the field of educational studies. No other institution – no hospital, no government, no corporate office, no factory has a curriculum in the sense that colleges, schools and universities do. Educational institutions all assert and assume that they have knowledge which others are entitled to have access to, and they employ people (teachers) who are specialists in making this knowledge available – obviously with varying degrees of success. If you want to acquire specialist knowledge, you may start with a book or the internet, but if you are serious you will go to an institution with a curriculum that includes what you want to learn and teachers who know how to teach.

This leads to the crucial question "what knowledge should make up the curriculum?" – not in the absolute sense of true knowledge, which is better termed belief, but in the sense of the "best knowledge we have in any field." If we cannot answer this question, or if there is no "better knowledge," this raises questions about our authority as curriculum theorists and the basis on which we expect parents to trust teachers when they hand their children over to them. The reality is that we do not know very much about curricula, except in everyday common sense terms such as timetables, lists of subjects, exam syllabuses and increasingly competence or skill statements.

In developing an argument about what we might mean by the idea of curriculum, I borrow an idea from a recent paper by my colleague, David Scott. His starting point is not curriculum as such but learning as the most basic human activity. What makes human learning human, he argues, is that it is an *epistemic activity* – in other words, it is involved in *producing knowledge*. Why else would we learn if not to find out something or how to do something – thus "producing knowledge"? It is useful to take Scott's idea a bit further by seeing learning on a continuum in two senses: historically, as over time learning has become increasingly complex and differentiated; and in terms of types of learning in today's modern societies.

So think of a continuum of learning in any modern society – there are the myriad forms of learning that make up our everyday lives. In these

processes of learning we produce knowledge all the time, mostly tacit, rarely codified or written down and sometimes remembered, sometimes not. This "everyday learning" is closely related to the everyday common sense knowledge that each of us builds up during our lives. In the broad sense of the term these forms of learning are *epistemic* or *knowledge producing* activities, although the knowledge they generate is always tied to specific places, contexts and people. It is useful, even necessary knowledge, to carry on our lives, but it is not enough in modern societies; that is why we have schools and curricula to store and make available specialist knowledge that our ancestors did not need and had not discovered.

At the other end of the continuum we have the knowledge producing activities undertaken by researchers at the leading edge of disciplines, mostly but not only in universities. They are engaged in producing new knowledge, and having it tested, criticized and evaluated by their peers; it is highly specialized and involves languages and symbols like mathematics that most of us do not understand. Somewhere in the middle of the continuum are a range of types of knowledge including the specialized of many occupations as well as *curriculum* or *school knowledge* that makes up the educational programs from the early years to masters degrees.

Curriculum knowledge is basically specialized knowledge organized for transmission, usually but not always from one generation to another; I use the term transmission without assuming that it is the one-way process that the metaphor implies. It is this curriculum knowledge that is the phenomenon that we claim to have specialist knowledge of as curriculum theorists, and it is curriculum theory that should enable us to analyze and critique its different forms, and hopefully develop/propose better alternatives.

We could describe curriculum theorists as specialists in a particular form of applied knowledge – knowledge that is "applied" in ways that make it both teachable and learnable for students at different stages and of different ages.

Curriculum knowledge is always specialized knowledge; it is specialized in two ways:

(i) *In relation to its disciplinary sources.* The knowledge produced by the disciplinary specialists – History, Physics, Geography. Disciplinary specialists do not always agree or always "get it right," and although their purpose is to discover new knowledge, sometimes they are influenced by factors other than the search for truth. However, it is difficult to think of an alternative and better source of "the best knowledge we have" in any field. There are no countries that have good education systems that do not rely on their disciplinary specialists as sources of curriculum knowledge.

(ii) *In relation to different groups of learners.* All curricula are designed for particular groups of learners, and have to bear in mind their likely prior knowledge.

Curriculum designers at any level are involved in the process that Bernstein referred to as *re-contextualization* – a relatively simple word for an extremely complex process. It refers to how elements of disciplinary knowledge are incorporated into curricula for learners of different ages and prior knowledge. I see our responsibility as curriculum theorists as investigating these *processes of re-contextualization*; there is extraordinarily little of this kind of research.

Bernstein's theory gives us two kinds of clues as to the kinds of questions such research might pursue. One is his distinction between Official and Pedagogic Re-contextualizing Discourses (ORD's and PRD's). With the former he is referring to the government and its agencies, and with the latter to the specialist professional associations of the educational community and specifically teachers. His distinction points to the inevitable tension between governments and educational communities' roles in shaping the curriculum. Curriculum theorists may be involved as specialist members of the education community or, in some cases, as advisers to governments (and sometimes both). In England, curriculum theorists tend to see themselves as supporters of teachers against governments; this is understandable but not necessarily productive – some of us are trying to change this.

Bernstein's second clue is in identifying the three processes involved in the process of re-contextualization; through how knowledge is selected, how it is sequenced and how it is paced. If a school, a state within a country or a country is re-designing its curriculum, curriculum designers will need to focus on its purposes: what is it trying to do (or support teachers in doing)? My definition of the purpose of a curriculum is *how does it promote conceptual progression?* or what the philosopher Christopher Winch refers to as "epistemic ascent." In my view, "epistemic ascent" requires subjects to set the conceptual signposts and boundaries for the "ascent" of students.

The issues this raises for different knowledge fields or subjects will depend on their different knowledge structures. Bernstein distinguished between knowledge structures that are *vertical* and *horizontal* – broadly referring to the sciences and humanities. There is very little research exploring how useful Bernstein's concepts might be in analyzing curricula. However, an example from research being undertaken in Cape Town, concerning the university engineering curriculum (SMIT, 2012) illustrates the possibilities. It is a very specific case but it illustrates the role that the kind of curriculum theory I have been discussing might play in research on curricula more generally.

Like any curriculum, engineering curricula are complex forms of socially organized specialized knowledge that are put together and modified over many years by, in this case, engineering specialists.

One issue that came up in the research was the teaching of Physics as part of a curriculum for future engineers. A key topic in Physics for most engineering is thermodynamics. However although the theory (in this case the equations) known as thermodynamics is the same for engineers and physicists, they interpret it very differently. For engineers, thermodynamics is useful in helping them solve engineering problems – what has gone wrong when a boiler in a power station stops working or when they are designing a nuclear reactor. In contrast, for physicists, thermodynamics is about understanding the general laws relating heat and work. Students are expected to move freely from one meaning of thermodynamics to another when their teachers may not be fully familiar with both. This is an example of an issue common to what Bernstein referred to as "integrated" curricula at all levels, when students are taught by different specialists and may themselves be expected to do the "integrating."

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

I have argued that the object of curriculum theory must be the curriculum – what is taught (or not taught), whether in university, college or school. As such it is always:

- A system of social and power relations with a particular history; this relates to the idea that a curriculum can be understood as "knowledge of the powerful";
- It is also always a complex body of specialist knowledge; this relates to whether or to what extent a curriculum represents "powerful knowledge" – in other words, does it provide students with resources for explanations and thinking of alternatives, what ever the field or stage?

Johan Muller and I have elsewhere argued that curriculum theory has in the past got its balance wrong between these two aspects. It has focused too much on the curriculum as "knowledge of the powerful" – a system geared to sustaining educational inequalities – and neglected the curriculum as "powerful knowledge." As a result, certain key questions about knowledge are avoided. For example:

- What is powerful about the knowledge that is characteristic of the curricula of elite schools?
- Why are teachers sometimes "frightened" by the idea of knowledge and see it as something to resist as inevitably oppressive and not as something to encourage as emancipatory?

- We need to study what is powerful about "powerful knowledge."
- Why it must be separate from the everyday experience of students of all ages in ways that some students can easily experience as alienating?
- The specialized forms it takes, their origins, their purposes and processes of selection, sequencing and pacing involved.

It is through these processes in different fields that curricula reproduce life chances. We do not know much about curricula knowledge except at the level of broad and often over-sweeping generalizations. One of the ways in which existing curricula persist in sustaining access to some and excluding others is because we have not investigated the extent to which the selection, pacing and sequencing processes are constrained, on the one hand, by the structure of knowledge and, on the other, by the structure of wider social interests.

If we are to undertake such research, as curriculum theorists we have to become like "dual specialists." Our primary specialization is curriculum theory. However, we also need a level of familiarity with the specialist fields we are investigating – whether it is university engineering or early reading. On the whole, this is where curriculum theory falls down and even perhaps why it does not develop: the two forms of specialization, curriculum theory and the particular field under investigation, are rarely brought together.

There is much to do.

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