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Curriculum as practiced in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

From 1995 to 1999, as a teacher educator in Pakistan teaching on professional development programs, my colleagues and I were able to address some needs and interests of primary school teachers. After obtaining a degree in teacher education I was better equipped with the skills required for designing, implementing, and evaluating the curriculum. I also gained further insight into teaching and learning through the field-based component. A “need analysis” determined teacher selection for our field component, with the overarching principle being to select teachers who considered change to be relevant. Other selection criteria included teachers who were willing to bring about “whole school improvement” through collaborative efforts, and those willing to practice their newly acquired skills in the Program’s field-based component. The present paper is an attempt to critically examine the concepts and philosophy of Whole School improvement.

INTRODUCTION

In Pakistan the curriculum prepared by policy makers is the “official curriculum.” It is meant to be taught and learned (Forquin, 1995) and is imposed with a “top down” approach for its adoption and implementation (Memon, 1997). Teachers are expected to implement it rigidly. Although it is a plan for learning (Taba, 1962), a program for all experiences, which the learner encounters under the direction of the school (Oliva, 1982), these theories are not often translated into practice. This curriculum is intended as “all of the experiences children have under the guidance of the teacher” (Caswell & Campbell, 1935), but because these “experiences” are generally not defined, they appear vague and are therefore difficult for teachers to implement. In addition, children often do not share the experiences or have the cognitive structures assumed by teachers. This curriculum therefore does not “encompass all learning opportunities provided by the school” (Saylor & Alexander, 1974), nor does it provide for both “directed” and “undirected” opportunities (Bobbitt, 1972) for learning.

With the practice of this narrow understanding, curriculum in Pakistan remains a “specified fixed course of study” (Webster’s). Children are considered to be the “beneficiaries” of this official fixed document although it may not be based on student needs or interests. The “specialists” design the objectives technically, with desirable outcomes based on “subject-specific objectives” (Tyler, 1975). This curriculum emphasizes transmission of knowledge, teacher skills of lecturing and demonstrating, and prescribed textbooks and guidelines. The affective domain of children goes unnoticed because of this “highly authoritative” kind of leadership in schools and classrooms (Liethwood et. al, 1999).

Several attempts have been made to import innovative curriculum models and approaches from the West, such as integrated curriculum, a child-centered approach, developmentally appropriate practice, cooperative and constructive learning, reflective practice, and others (Memon, 1997). However, these approaches are not sustained because they are initially taught by “experts” from outside the teachers own schools (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992), and, because of lack of “ownership” during the curriculum planning stage, teachers are unable to handle these developed concepts. Thus there occurs a mismatch between curriculum and curriculum implementers.

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Personal experiences of curriculum

As a trained teacher in both Early Childhood Education and the Montessori method of teaching, I am equipped for the “what” and “how” of teaching pre-school children. This curriculum is based on cognitive and skill development. It also adheres to the humanistic and caring relationship of trying to provide personally satisfying experiences for each individual (Noddings, 1986). The curriculum rests on the underlying principle of moral development (Campbell, 2001) and is developmentally appropriate (Bredakamp, 1987) to the learner’s age. Therefore, with this curriculum and training, I was able to address the learners’ needs and interest. However, after seven years of implementing this curriculum, I changed schools to teach in a formal, public primary school. There I found to my surprise that my early training and experience were not accepted at this “official” school. I became an “apprentice” (Feiman-Nemser, 1990) required to observe the “expert” teacher in her expertise of the craft of teaching. There I learned to cope with what Hargreaves (1994) identifies as structured situational constraints, accountability, demands, testing requirements and conflicting expectations.

Because these selected teachers came from different grade levels, disciplines, and experiences, we, teacher educators designed a curriculum that was skill-based rather than content-based. Our goal was for teachers to re-conceptualize their thinking about teaching through reflective practice (Schon, 1987) and to construct new knowledge. We believed that their re-conceptualized thinking and reflections would influence and affect their actions in the classroom and school: for example, in the classroom organization, management, lesson planning, strategies chosen, level of subject matter knowledge, attitudes and relationships with colleagues, and growth from personal to professional teachers and developers. One of our prime concerns was to help teachers become “curriculum planners” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) in order to get a sense of ownership of their curriculum. In this way, we could better equip teachers to address the needs and interests of their young learners. Impact studies conducted on these programs (Vazir, 1998; Khamis, 2000) reveal that some teachers *had* taken initiatives in changing classroom practice. In spite of the challenges they faced, these teachers tried many innovative strategies, reflected upon them, and modified them to suit the context. When opportunity and support were provided by principals, supervisors, and colleagues (Ahmad Ali, 1998) changes in teaching and student learning outcomes were observed to be greater. On the other hand if opportunity and support were lacking teachers reverted to their traditional teaching practice.

Concepts of curriculum that I advocate for primary teachers in Pakistan

While considerable research has occurred on the already designed and practiced curriculum and on the extent to which curriculum policy and practice “mutually shape and set” the reform agenda for each other (Doyle, 1992), comparatively less has been done on the curriculum as experienced by children and on the relationships of these experiences to what policy makers had intended or what teachers had enacted. Children construct an “experienced” curriculum that at times may be at odds with the priorities stated in documents and outlined in plans governing what teachers’ require students to do (Thiessen, 1997).

But based on my experiences as a teacher educator, and a curriculum planner I should like to suggest that teachers in Pakistan generally, and more particularly at the primary level, need to move from a “transmission” to “transaction” to a “transformation” mode of teaching (Miller & Seller, 1990) accomplished by considering the curriculum as “experience” rather than exclusively as an official “document” based on content. My theoretical underpinnings are based on a progressive view, the concept of “curriculum as experience” (Dewey, 1902). In my country, curriculum as “official” and “intended content” ignores children’s experiences of daily life at school. Thus currently, learning at school remains remote from a present and future life where one must deal with practical knowledge and skills. Schools in Pakistan do not prepare the child for life outside school.

Curriculum as experience, I believe, is the kind of education imparted as a reconstruction or reorganization of experience. This adds to the meaning of experience, and which, in turn, increases the

teacher's ability to direct the course of subsequent experience by re-conceptualizing thinking (Pinar, 1975) in alternate ways. Curriculum is not seen as an "end" merely leading to the acquisition of subject matter; instead it is organization of new learning, which becomes a tool for learners to use in understanding and intelligently ordering their experiences. It is a child-centered approach to education and instruction and, it emphasizes what educators refer to today as "self-regulated learning strategies" (Jackson, 1992). Curriculum as experiences lays importance on intelligent problem solving in which each child solves the problem with which he or she is confronted by selecting appropriate material and methods.

The curriculum will not start with facts and truths that are outside the range of experience of those taught (Dewey, 1902), rather, with learning's that are consistent with the experiences learners already have had. Subject matter is not to be selected on the basis of what adults think will be useful for the learner at some future time. Instead, the present experience of the learner is to become the primary focus. The achievements of the past are to serve as a resource for helping learners both to understand their present conditions and to deal with present problems. It becomes necessary to cease thinking of the child's experience as something hard and fast instead it needs to be considered as something fluid, embryonic, and vital, so as to realize that the child and the curriculum are simply "two limits which define a single process." (Dewey, 1902)

A good teacher senses curricular significances and seizes on them for educational purposes. A good teacher arranges for such experiences as a series of events that take place, rather than waiting for them to happen spontaneously. These experiences will guide the students or even better the children in all respects to what their life as adults, should be (Bobbitt, 1972).

It is important to recognize incidental learning as a part of curriculum of experience for students both in and out of school, thus characterizing curriculum as that which operates as a systematic learning of knowledge and skills that endures changes of significant importance. Parents and others, consciously or unconsciously, deliver "common knowledge" at home and in the society in which the student lives. Although these learning experiences may be vague and subjective (Kliebard, 1987), unwritten and hidden (Drebeen, 1976; Jackson, 1992), they can be acknowledged and regarded as multiple experiences.

Holding this broader concept of curriculum, I can therefore say that curriculum is not a narrow blueprint; what is needed is a broadly defined concept of curriculum that will endure for a long time and fit most life contexts. I agree with Jackson's (1992) suggestion, that teachers need to pose the following questions the answers to which will help them form their own concept of curriculum: a) What purpose does each definition serve? b) Who stands to gain what by adopting it? and c) What would be the consequences of doing so?

For any formal curriculum, the children's own instincts, thought processes, and interests are major elements to relate to that curriculum. These should be derived as Hall notes from data collected through careful analysis of a child's natural interests, modes of thoughts, and characteristics at various stages of personal development (cited in Jackson, 1992). Curriculum for children may also incorporate a "project method" for "activity-based" and "experience" curriculum through which students will actually gain a better mastery of subject matter (Kilpatrick, 1918). Although, I am cognizant of the fact that large class size and lack of resources will pose a major challenge to the project method.

Problem-solving methods can become the basis of scientific methods. I believe by being given the opportunity to engage their natural interests and characteristics in real-life problems within a school setting, students "will form habits" that will assist them in their later life (Freire, 1985). I advocate a humanistic approach that provides personally satisfying experiences for each individual so that the curriculum becomes a "liberating process" (McNeil, 1977).

Curriculum studies and teacher development

Rather than see themselves solely as curriculum implementers who simply accept a curriculum as given, teachers should see themselves as curriculum planners achieved by way of telling and retelling their narratives of experience to construct their classroom curriculum (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). Then teachers and policy-makers can work together towards a common goal: curriculum as a vehicle by which learners as thinking and developing human beings have an experiential relationship with subject matter, disciplines, and organized fields of study.

Teachers' who see themselves as actual "self reflectors" (Kliebard, 1987) as those who possess "practical knowledge" (Elbaz, 1983), or "personal practical knowledge" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) will raise these kinds of questions (Tyler, 1975): What educational purposes should the school seek to attain? What educational experiences can be provided which are likely to attain these purposes? How can these experiences be effectively organized? How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained? Teacher development will occur when teachers ask themselves these questions. It is the experiential way, an evolutionary way, recognized by John Dewey. A person may change current practice when a *new experience* causes re-examination of problems: intuitively we start thinking of alternative solutions (Stake, 1987; p.56).

The humanistically inclined, self-reflecting teachers will recognize students not as recipients but as active learners who possess the "possibility" (Freire, 1985) of achieving a deep awareness, both of the socio-cultural reality that shapes their lives and their ability to transform that reality. Unless children see objectively the facts of a situation, they will accept the situation apathetically, believing themselves incapable of affecting their destiny. In Pakistan, such is the plight; therefore I feel the perspective of critical thinking should be brought into the classroom. This kind of "liberating" curriculum serves the interests of the dominated, the broad working class, and may create democratic classrooms (Dewey, 1950).

In order to teach from a humanistic and liberating concept of curriculum, Pakistani teachers should consider an alternative, five conceptual orientation (Eisner & Vallance, 1974) in preparation for teaching curriculum as experience. As a teacher educator, I feel these orientations reflect a coherent perspective on teaching and learning to teach that may give direction to the practical activities of teacher development.

The first orientation is curriculum as a **cognitive process**; this view will enable teachers to develop and sharpen their own cognitive skills, not as mere technicians but by seeking intellectual pursuits beyond the text so that learning occurs in the classroom. An interactive relationship among the teacher, the learner, and the subject matter, will promote schooling as open-ended and growth-oriented, and the results will be "dynamic learning" (Feiman-Nemser, 1990). This orientation provides the teacher with intellectual autonomy to make his or her own selections and interpretations of situations that he or she encounters beyond the context of schooling. Teachers should then be able to transfer and apply cognitive skills to a wide variety of situations without being "trained."

Curriculum viewed as **technology** will help facilitate teachers to locate efficient means for the setting of pre-defined, non-problematic ends so that goals (Tyler, 1975) can be achieved. Teachers will basically address how to communicate knowledge and facilitate learning more effectively through their pedagogy, and learn by preparing, organizing, and presenting material for instruction.

Curriculum viewed as **self-actualization** seeks for schooling to become a means to personal fulfillment. It can also be an encompassing and enriching experience of personal development for teachers to build on their "personal practical knowledge" and to be able to move from past experiences to constructing

current ones, thus moving towards the future through self-directed critical reflection and inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). This orientation calls for a breaking away from the norm to independent personal self-identity (Freire, 1985). I believe this may help teachers' to revise their goals for self-realization in order to realistically fit the limited opportunities their school provides. This will in turn avoid frustrations at the workplace (Hargreaves, 1994), enabling the teacher the freedom to address children's individual needs for growth and personal integrity.

Curriculum viewed as **social re-construction** will prepare teachers to deal with both the students' interests and society's needs in the present and future. It emphasizes the child's context within a larger social context. Teachers will be seen as "social reformers" willing to take responsibility for the future society's basic needs. They will envision the social view of schooling and examine education and curriculum in relation to social values and political positions, which are clearly stated between what is and what might be the ideal and the real. This curriculum views social issues and change as crucial to personal development. It helps the individual learner to keep pace with and adapt to the changing world (Dewey, 1900). One way teachers can become involved in change is to act as "reflective practitioners" who think about their actions and the consequences of those actions (Schon, 1987).

The final orientation is to view curriculum development for teachers as **academic rationalization's** major goal; this view enables students to use and appreciate the ideas and works that constitute the various artistic (Eisner, 1998) and intellectual disciplines. In order to do this to enable the learner to acquire the tools to participate in various cultural traditions, the teacher should cultivate the learner's intellect in meaningful ways by providing opportunities to acquire an understanding of subject matter in various disciplines. These disciplines would provide conceptions through which power and precision would demonstrate intellectual activity that reflects on a person's enduring quest for meaning (Bruner, 1961). This intellectual activity makes the teacher and subject matter both a part of the curriculum (Dewey, 1902).

Conclusions

My conceptual framework is based on what I feel would be most suitable to my own context, the education system of Pakistan. For me, what Dewey and others call "curriculum as experience" are what children in Pakistan need. This curriculum in turn requires teachers who are skilled in helping children to meet this need. I am not advocating a radical change for teachers to move immediately from teaching in the traditional mode of official curriculum to an innovative curriculum as experienced. That move would be a challenging task as well as an idealistic venture. However, like Dewey (1950), I too want to raise some pertinent questions that I feel teachers need to address in order to guide their inquiry into the existing curriculum practice in Pakistan today, and later to guide their professional development. These reflective questions should include the following: What is the best way to relate the child to the existing rigid, specialist-imposed curriculum in Pakistan? How can I enrich the daily lives of students? What kind of order should I bring into the child's experience?

What I am proposing is for teachers to consider moving from the status quo to becoming "autonomous change agents" in their classrooms (Clandinin, 1986). To accomplish this act of teacher development, teachers should consider for Eisner and Vallance's (1974) five orientations of curriculum as a basic framework for learning to implement a curriculum that addresses children's needs and interests. A curriculum in which are inherent a cognitive process, a technology, a self-actualization, a social re-construction, and an academic rationalization will incorporate into its practice children's experiences as lived in the classroom. They also will value and try to provide for such experiences as moments of cognitive and personal growth. This would hopefully clarify their own curriculum-based approach to teaching and learning (Miller & Sellar, 1990).

Just as I have built my conceptual framework of curriculum on an eclectic approach, I would advocate that teacher development programs assist other Pakistani teachers to see themselves as curriculum planners and try to do the same. Although the process and approach may be slow, costly, and unpredictable, and although one may not even have high expectations of the benefits system-wise, as a start, these orientations may be embedded alongside bureaucratic procedures and technical control of curriculum.

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