A CONCEPTUAL STRUCTURE OF CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

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1. COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

1.1 “Is It the Same Campaign?”

In the present paper comparative method will be applied in its analytic-heuristic function. The manifold phenomena pertaining to curriculum development in different national societies will be ordered in a logically structured conceptual model within which curriculum problems can be identified, hypotheses located and formulated. Curriculum development is here used in the generally accepted sense of the construction and revision of a programme of ordered sequences of learning experiences, related to intended objectives. In the course of my comparison I shall refer to the motives of such development (or revision), to its theoretical assumptions and to its strategies. The countries I have chosen for my analyses and from which I shall mainly draw my illustrations are, for reasons which are partly systematic, partly accidental: England, the Federal Republic of Germany, the German Democratic Republic, Sweden, the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R.

At this point you might ask the question which was raised at the Third International Curriculum Conference at Oxford in September 1967. Are each of the three countries represented at that conference (Canada, England, U.S.A.) conducting the same campaign? — The answer, as related in the conference report, was quite clearly ‘no’. Elsewhere the rapporteur refers to a “culture clash”, significantly revealed by differences in the professional composition of the attending groups (roughly: a majority of school teachers from England, university teachers and research workers from the U.S., a relatively strong group of administrators from Canada) and in the emphasis they put on practice, theoretic foundation and administrative implementation respectively. Surely, however, these are different facets of one complex system and it is partly owing to the lack of a common conceptual framework that this was hardly realized.

At the level of strategies a recent publication (R. M. Thomas et al., 1968) has in fact developed a “rationale” of analysis applicable to 13 nations, highly industrialized and former colonial countries. Again, Beauchamp & Beauchamp (1967) have looked for different patterns of what they term curriculum engineering. Such attempts however, important as they are as contributions to a general curriculum language, have so far abstained from probing the theoretic foundations upon which the different cultural variants of curriculum development are based.

Nor has the UNESCO “Meeting of Experts on Curriculum of General Education” (January 1968) — I refer to the conference results, not to individual contributions — been able to go far beyond observations and
definitions of a general nature, formal principles of curriculum construction and a few pragmatic statements about interaction and communication in policy decisions. Deliberations on some of the most essential questions, e.g. those concerning differentiation in the curriculum, stopped short, not only at the obvious political and ideological differences, but also because of the evident limits of common curriculum discourse.

1.2 Motives for Curriculum Development

Yet, there can be no doubt that the most potent motives for curriculum innovation are shared by all countries here concerned (and by many others). We are indeed dealing with a matter of common concern, a set of common problems, even "a common campaign". It is not my intention at the present moment to prove (or disprove) any general theory of convergence of educational policy in East and West. Rather do I propose to set forth within the common frame of reference some of the differences in purpose, weight and idiom in the formulation of curriculum problems and in the technique of their attempted solutions in various countries, be they traceable to different social and political regimes and ideologies, or be they the results of differences in the structure and functioning of the respective educational systems.

(1). In the first place on a list of motives for curriculum revision — mind that they really form a continuum! — one usually finds the "explosion of knowledge", so called especially in English speaking countries, termed "progress of sciences" in others. A vastly extended body of information and rapidly changing concepts and methods call for new programmes and for rationalized ways of planning curricula and instruction.

(2). However, the extension of the scope and instruments of the sciences, natural and social, challenges the curriculum in a more profound manner. As a prime mode of explaining, and coping with, reality in our life, the sciences, or, rather, certain of their elements, must be incorporated in the education of all young people, including the very young, in such a way that they can effectively and creatively put them to use. Certain progress in our knowledge of cognitive growth and of the process and potentialities of learning seem to make this possible. Here then is our second motive: the realization of the needs and possibilities of a high intellectual level of general education.

(3). Closely connected with this motive is a third: innovations in the system of instruction. The chances for a rationalization of instruction, through more individualized learning among other things, have considerable impact on the curriculum. The new media of public communication too have of course penetrated more deeply into a "life-long education" than is usually taken into account by formal curriculum work.

(4). However, didactic insight and improved instruction are not the only or even the main outcomes of an increased awareness bearing on curriculum. Changes in the structure of society, in the share of its members in economic
and political responsibilities and in their aspirations have brought about a vast quantitative and qualitative expansion of the school population. Curricular changes, logically preceding such statutory decisions, like raising the school leaving age, altering principles and procedures of selection and examinations, concentrating and shortening certain phases of schooling, in practice often have to follow them. Compensatory education for the socio-culturally disadvantaged, as well as attention to new modes of experience, of expression and concern for young people come under this rubric.

(3). The economic side of this development has its peculiar curricular problems. Science and technology as the basis of modern production are increasingly reflected in the general school curriculum, although a short-cut gearing of curriculum policy to production demands has already proved of doubtful value. Nevertheless, the rapid pace of change in production methods and in job structures, the demands for vocational mobility and availability, the demands for ever improved productivity have a direct impact on education considered as a prime factor of production. Add to this the tension of international competition, the formation of professional and economic pressure groups, consequent changes of official, party and government, policy — and you have one of the most powerful settings of curriculum revision of recent years. Illustrations from all countries concerned come to mind, such as changes in Soviet educational policy, 1958-1964, or in the federal educational legislation of the U.S., 1958-1965 (N.D.E.A. and E.S.E.A.), etc.

What then are the different responses to these challenges? Can we interpret them within a conceptual framework of the common problem?

2. CONCEPTS OF CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

2.1 A Conceptual Framework

An analysis of the general (inter-cultural) field of curriculum development seems to yield categories and relationships which can be arranged in a "conceptual framework". Such a framework or "schema" is a prerequisite for any theoretically sound curriculum work, as has been justly stressed by American students of the curriculum like Vergil Herrick, Ralph Tyler, Hilda Taba and others.

Since

(1) it is the purpose of education to enable the individual to deal with various situations in life, since

(2) the individual gains this ability through acquiring certain qualifications and dispositions, and since

(3) it is through the various elements of the curriculum that such qualifications are to be generated,

a rationally planned curriculum should be developed on the basis of an identification of these situations, qualifications, and curriculum elements to an optimal degree of correctness and objectivity.
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The general task of systematic curriculum development seems to be, therefore, the formation of hypotheses on these three classes of curriculum variables and on the relations between them. Now, in order to identify situations — in a comprehensive, not narrowly pragmatic sense — together with the appropriate functions they require, to define qualifications to meet these requirements, and to construct curricula which will engender those qualifications, curriculum workers must

1. derive and apply criteria for these identifications — such criteria will combine reasoned value statements, analytic appraisals of objective (present and future) needs, evidence on the effects of learning and instruction, elements of cultural tradition; they must therefore

2. locate, muster and produce as much of the necessary evidence for objective choice as possible; and, for this purpose

3. construct appropriate procedures of assessment and choice.

The schema here outlined will in the first place help us to keep apart different levels of curriculum development too often confused in practice: the identification of aims; the definition of specific objectives into which aims must be translated; the selection of appropriate curriculum elements ("content"); finally, the organization of instruction.

Thus, to take a first example, starting from situations of personal, social, political, vocational life and defining needed qualifications through an analysis of these situations, we would carefully distinguish between cognitive and affective structures we intend to develop and the so-called "structures of disciplines" that are supposed — and may eventually prove — to contribute to this development. Any hypothesis on the effect of curriculum elements in generating "behaviour" has of course to be explicitly stated and, in principle, verified. Nor can we generalize on the value of disciplines in building a universe of "meaning" for the learner. Such philosophic "realism", as Ph. H. Phenix aptly calls it, would have to be checked in detail. It is, no doubt, largely through the established system of arts and sciences, through their substance, principles and methods that we undertake to observe, appreciate and interpret reality and are thus enabled to deal with it. But we will have to distinguish carefully between such different qualifying "potentialities" of a science as its substantive content, its guiding concern and its logic or "syntactical structure" — to paraphrase Joseph Schwab. We thus gain a safer method of relating curriculum content to educational aims of insight, mastery and aspiration — in the "cognitive", the "affective", or the "psychomotor domain", to use the language of curriculum taxonomists.

Such a taxonomy of operationally defined objectives — as we perceive from our schema — has its place in the definition and evaluation of the effects of curriculum elements in attaining certain behavioural objectives and also in improving educational awareness on the instructional side, not however in the primary justification of content. It seems surprising that some eminent
authorities on curriculum should have confounded these two distinct modes of appraisal. Surely, the question whether an item ought to be taught is different from, and has precedence over the question of how it can be taught.

Again, take that famous but, I think, somewhat illicit triad: child-centred, society-centred, discipline-centred curriculum. At the level of situations and aims it hardly applies: we must identify situations and functions of the individual in society. On the level of curriculum elements, of school instruction and education, to be sure, you may well allow for greater or smaller degrees of tolerance to the demands of the child at his age or to the present and future demands of society respectively.

Or, for one final example: following our own model, it does not seem that we are particularly helped by concentrating our theoretical considerations on levels of decision. Decisions may be taken, as John Goodlad (Goodlad & Richter 1966) says, at the societal, the institutional, the instructional level. But neither is the societal level identical with political authorities, nor is the category of “decision” apt to elicit all the really pertinent influences on a curriculum, national or other. Societal consensus on educational aims, the rational “decision” based on curriculum enquiry, the decision at the political level, and the choice of the teacher among educational alternatives must obviously be distinguished. It is the task of those responsible for curriculum development to articulate value systems and rational insight into social and individual needs and aspirations that prevail in a society, to translate them into general aims and detailed educational objectives, to integrate reflected practical experience and empirical evidence on the effects of learning and instruction, and thus to actualize that consensus on curriculum which is a necessary postulate of any system of public education and to increase the transparency of the decision-making process.

2.2 The Schema in Operation

Within this conceptual framework we now have to review theory and practice of curriculum development in the six countries mentioned earlier. Regarding curriculum theory in general, we find the view expressed throughout that “no coherent rational curriculum theory exists as yet,” or that “curriculum theory has played but a small part in producing change”, or that “up to this time we have no general scientific principle for the solution of the problem of content of education” — to quote three statements from England, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. respectively. Such statements are, of course, made in a mood of concern and challenge.

If, however, and insofar as, there is no accepted theory, the theoretic assumptions of curriculum development can certainly be recognized. Let us begin at the level of aims and their criteria. At one end there is the positivist assertion that, as a well-known English researcher recently said, “the crucial problem of education is the interaction between the child and the teacher” and that all else — especially the question of content — “is subservient”.

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The reason for such evasion is of course the difficulty of objectivising and validating the selection of aims and contents. This scepticism — and its frequent counterpart, conservatism — has marked certain parts of professional opinion in England, for instance, and in the Federal Republic of Germany. The reasons, if I see them correctly, lie between straight pragmatism and a philosophy of organic growth according to which such complex problems as curriculum decisions, including aspects of aspirations and values, do not lend themselves to hypothetic-deductive styles of reasoning and cannot be based on empirical research.

The task is, let us remember, to apply reasoned and systematic methods in identifying educational aims for present and future situations. "Raising the school leaving age", for instance, puts this question to the curriculum worker in England. The challenge was taken up by English education as one of the central tasks for the "Schools Council for the Curriculum and Examinations". The work is done with energy and a sense of commitment, yet again, mainly at the pragmatic level of existing practices and plausible innovations, even though more systematic ways of ascertaining objective needs and present and future expectations are envisaged. A growing body of theory may eventually instil principles of such systematic enquiry into the work of the Council.

The position is clearly different in the "socialist" countries where the role of education at the present time is regarded as the chance, and indeed the task, of assisting all young people in acquiring a scientific understanding of the world. The natural and social sciences are considered the appropriate and necessary tools of interpretation and equipment for responsible and productive living. Together with the arts and physical education and on a foundation of polytechnic education — itself a most complex curriculum area, combining scientific interpretation, technological understanding and experience of production — the sciences are held to develop the all-round educated socialist personality. In accordance with Marxist psychology of personality building, no dividing line between material knowledge and its formative effect is recognized in principle. Still, the task of identifying the special elements of the various fields of science, arts and technology which hold educative "potentialities" is considered to be a central assignment — and a desideratum — of "didactics". This implies tasks of analysing working instruments and work situations, as demanded in the U.S.S.R. by M. N. Skatkin (1967), but also the elaboration of a didactic theory of the "building of activities" — the nearest equivalent of Western "behaviour" — through educational content. On this last desideratum, a discussion organized by the editorial board of Sovietskaia Pedagogika and others in 1965 revealed notable differences of opinion on the relations between "Science and the School Subject". It does seem indeed that under the present procedures of curriculum revision the dominance of subject matter specialists is coupled with a neglect of the educational perspective. Arguments against "subjectivism" and "empiricism"