Background to Curriculum  
– Historical Definitions –

Curriculum is typically considered to be the official written document from a higher authority, such as the local school district or school board. Such a document is seen as a mandated template that must be followed by all teachers. Unfortunately, in many cases, teachers are supposed to follow such a mandated curriculum.

Historical Definitions of Curriculum:

1. "A sequence of potential experiences is set up in the school for the purpose of disciplining children and youth in group ways of thinking and acting. This set of experiences is referred to as the curriculum." (Smith, et al., 1957)

2. "A general over-all plan of the content or specific materials of instruction that the school should offer the student by way of qualifying him for graduation or certification or for entrance into a professional or vocational field." (Good, 1959)

3. "A curriculum is a plan for learning." (Taba, 1962)

4. "All the experiences a learner has under the guidance of the school." (Foshay, 1969)

5. "The planned and guided learning experiences and intended outcomes, formulated through the systematic reconstruction of knowledge and experience, under the auspices of the school, for the learner's continuous and willful growth in person-social competence." (Tanner and Tanner, 1975)

6. "Curriculum is often taken to mean a course of study. When we set our imaginations free from the narrow notion that a course of study is a series of textbooks or specific outline of topics to be covered and objectives to be attained, broader more meaningful notions emerge. A curriculum can become one's life course of action. It can mean the paths we have followed and the paths we intend to follow. In this broad sense, curriculum can be viewed as a person's life experience." (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988)

Definitions 1 – 5 are typically those that relate to how teachers and administrators view curriculum. In fact, these seem to underlie the assumptions about schooling that are held by children and parents. In general, these five definitions and their related assumptions about schooling and learning tend to undermine effective integration. However, definition #6 may provide a view that is more consistent with an integrated curriculum that is more meaningful, relevant, interesting, and engaging.
3 Basic Types of Curriculum

Explicit – This type of curriculum is what appears in documents and teachers' plans. It is closely aligned with the historical curriculum definitions 1-3 and 5.

Implicit (or hidden) – This type of curriculum has to do with how particular assumptions about schooling and learning manifest in practice. For example, when a teacher has her or his desk at the front of the classroom and "teaches" from this area, the message that is being learned by students is that the teacher is in control, including being the knowledge authority, and is the center of attention. The teacher is also of central importance. Another example involves the value of particular topics that is communicated implicitly. Such values can be communicated by time spent, by tone of voice, or by how the topic is treated (e.g., trivialized or marginalized).

Null – The null curriculum is what is not taught. Not teaching some particular idea or sets of ideas may be due to mandates from higher authorities, to a teacher’s lack of knowledge, or to deeply ingrained assumptions and biases. Teachers and schools may not teach that Christopher Columbus slaughtered many of the native peoples he encountered when he "discovered" the Americas. Many teachers are under pressure not to teach evolution.
Contexts of Curriculum

Typically, curriculum documents focus on specific subject matter content. However, if we are to take seriously broader notions of curriculum, such as that described by Connelly and Clandinin (1988), then we must contend with multiple contexts that affect curriculum, students, and teachers. The following diagram provides an overview of some of these contexts.

Questions:

- Which of the contexts within the overall context of curriculum and instruction do not, cannot, and/or should not appear in curricular documents at the district, state, or national levels?
- Which of the contexts within the overall context of curriculum and instruction typically appear in curricular documents at the district, state, or national levels?
- When dealing with the context of subject matter:
  - Who decides on what content should be included?
  - Why is certain content more important (included) than other content (not included)?
  - Who should decide on what content to include?
  - How should subject matter learning be approached (e.g., as material for problem solving and inquiry, as material to be memorized, etc.)?
- What are the implications of such a view of curricular contexts for teaching, learning, and schooling?
- Based on the above figure, how should curricular development occur?
- What are the implications of the center of contextual conjunction for how we conceive of curricular enactment, learning, teaching, and schooling?
Trivialization of Curriculum

Curriculum and therefore learning and participating in school can be trivialized. Such trivialization can lead to rendering schooling irrelevant and meaningless for many students. A summary of trivialization appears below (see Wood, 1990)

Teaching Strategies

- Fragmenting knowledge into lists of facts, etc.
- Mystification of knowledge – complexities are too great for students to understand
- Omission of controversial, anomalous, or contemporaneous material – “Dumbing Down”
- Defensive Simplification – ritual of seeming to deal with topics while not actually teaching them

Contributing Factors

- Teacher deskillling: "Teacher Proofing" the curriculum
- Mandated curriculum and standardized testing
- Credentialling schemes
- Bureaucratic rather than professional and educational norms as basis for operation of schools: "Neutering of Teachers" – taking away teachers’ right to make instructional and curricular decisions
- Requirements for teachers to follow prescribed practices in both the content and implementation of the curriculum without the power to influence the policies governing these prescriptions

Reference:

Education for Democracy vs. Anti-democratic Education

Values and Assumptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Democratic</th>
<th>Anti-Democratic (Corporate)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questioning and critiquing authority</td>
<td>Obedience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuality</td>
<td>Conformity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in the process of democracy</td>
<td>Follow rules and processes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 Principles for Empowering Students (and Teachers)

- Believe in the individual's right and responsibility to participate publicly.
- Have a sense of political efficacy, that is, the knowledge that one's contributions to community life are important.
- Value the principles of democratic life – equality (equity), liberty, community.
- Know that alternative arrangements to the status quo exist and are worthwhile.
- Gain the requisite intellectual skills to participate in public discourse.

Student Empowerment

- Students will come to believe in the individual's right and responsibility to participate publicly.
- Students will develop a sense of political efficacy (that one's contributions to the community are important).
- Students will value the principles of democratic life: equality, liberty, and community.
- Students will know that alternatives to the status quo exist and are worthwhile.
- Students will gain the intellectual skills to participate in public discourse.

Choice and Control

- Students have choice and control over the curriculum.
- Control over knowledge and information.
- Students gain a sense of their own wisdom: ability to think, make judgments, and act.
- Students have right to order their own world.

Equity

- Students have right to equal access to curriculum (no class and political division).

Community

- Classroom community extends beyond the classroom into the surrounding community.

Worth

- Teachers maintain a holistic perspective on situational problem solving.
- Enjoy being with students.
- Draw insights from student experiences outside school.
- Hold a sense of mission about the importance of teaching.
- Exhibit love and compassion for students.

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● Determine ways to build on student strengths.
● Have a clear sense of meaning and direction and are in the process of revising the same.
● Guide their work with a quest for that which is worthwhile and just.
● Consider the issue of developmental appropriateness as problematic in each new situation.
● Actively engage in self-education.

**Barriers to Teacher Empowerment**

● State (Provincial) reform mandates
● Standardized tests mandated by state (province) or district (board)
● District curriculum guides
● Required texts
● Uniform instructional pacing
● Absence of adequate staff development program (no long-term investment in development)
● Organization of schools
● Teacher evaluation models
● Professional preparation of teachers which limits exposure to critical issues

**Feminist Perspectives of Community vs. Male Domination**

● Teacher modeling of thinking as a fallible, but attainable activity.
● Care of and for students.
● Public view of teaching as women's work, but profession is dominated by men.
● Language used by women is viewed as less credible in coed groups.
● Men and boys have been socialized in more dominant and assertive forms of discourse.
● Media reflect stereotypical views of woman teachers, who are either lazy and superficial, etc. or inflexible "battle-ax."

**Questions:**

- How do you see these aspects manifesting in your school or education context?
- What approaches can you think of to overcome these barriers?
- How could these approaches be addressed within the framework of your school?

**References**

Curriculum Analysis

In designing or adapting curriculum, it is important to formulate a perspective of where your curriculum and teaching is situated in terms of various orientations and philosophical or theoretical frameworks (see previous pages on curriculum background). The following information may help you further define your own position or the position of curriculum documents with which you must contend.

Curricular Assumptions

The following figure depicts a three-dimensional grid that can allow you to examine how particular assumptions and values affect curricular outcomes. After looking at this figure, try to answer some of the questions listed below the figure.
Questions:

- What assumptions, beliefs, and values do you have about how people learn?
  - How do these assumptions, beliefs, and values manifest in students' language and actions?
  - How do these assumptions, beliefs, and values manifest in curricular standards, curricular content, instructional strategies, and school organization?
  - How do your answers to the previous questions affect student and teacher identities, participation, meaning, relevance, access to knowledge, and access to skills?

- What assumptions, beliefs, and values do you have about teaching?
  - How do these assumptions, beliefs, and values manifest in students' and teachers' language and actions?
  - How do these assumptions, beliefs, and values manifest in curricular standards, curricular content, instructional strategies, and school organization?
  - How do your answers to the previous questions affect student and teacher identities, participation, meaning, relevance, access to knowledge, and access to skills?

- What assumptions, beliefs, and values do you have about what knowledge means?
  - How do these assumptions, beliefs, and values manifest in students' and teachers' language and actions?
  - How do these assumptions, beliefs, and values manifest in curricular standards, curricular content, instructional strategies, and school organization?
  - How do your answers to the previous questions affect student and teacher identities, participation, meaning, relevance, access to knowledge, and access to skills?

- What assumptions, beliefs, and values do you have about student and teacher behavior?
  - How do these assumptions, beliefs, and values manifest in students' and teachers' language and actions?
  - How do these assumptions, beliefs, and values manifest in curricular standards, curricular content, instructional strategies, and school organization?
  - How do your answers to the previous questions affect student and teacher identities, participation, meaning, relevance, access to knowledge, and access to skills?

- What assumptions, beliefs, and values do you have about student and teacher thinking?
  - How do these assumptions, beliefs, and values manifest in students' and teachers' language and actions?
  - How do these assumptions, beliefs, and values manifest in curricular standards, curricular content, instructional strategies, and school organization?
  - How do your answers to the previous questions affect student and teacher identities, participation, meaning, relevance, access to knowledge, and access to skills?

- What assumptions, beliefs, and values do you have about assessment?
  - How do these assumptions, beliefs, and values manifest in students' and teachers' language and actions?
  - How do these assumptions, beliefs, and values manifest in curricular standards, curricular content, instructional strategies, and school organization?
  - How do your answers to the previous questions affect student and teacher identities, participation, meaning, relevance, access to knowledge, and access to skills?

- What assumptions, beliefs, and values do you have about nature of schooling?
  - How do these assumptions, beliefs, and values manifest in students' and teachers' language and actions?
and actions?

- How do these assumptions, beliefs, and values manifest in curricular standards, curricular content, instructional strategies, and school organization?
- How do your answers to the previous questions affect student and teacher identities, participation, meaning, relevance, access to knowledge, and access to skills?

- What assumptions, beliefs, and values do you have about purpose of schooling?
  - How do these assumptions, beliefs, and values manifest in students' and teachers' language and actions?
  - How do these assumptions, beliefs, and values manifest in curricular standards, curricular content, instructional strategies, and school organization?
  - How do your answers to the previous questions affect student and teacher identities, participation, meaning, relevance, access to knowledge, and access to skills?

- How do all of your responses relate to or differ in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, social class, perceived educability, and sexual orientation of students (and teachers)?

**Positioning Your Curriculum or Mandated Curriculum within Philosophical and Theoretical Orientations**

The following figure depicts how curricular approaches are situated within the dimensions of the individual, society, and knowledge. Take a few minutes to examine the figure, then try to position your own curricular approach or the curricular approach of your school within these dimensions.
Integrated Curriculum and Instruction

The notion of an integrated curriculum over the past several decades has waxed and waned in popularity. However, as with many of the "buzz words" in education, integration has different meanings to different people. The following information will present a brief overview of integration and how we might pursue a more effective integrated curriculum.

In most cases, attempts to integrate the curriculum have never seemed to be all that successful. Although such an approach still holds a great deal of potential for deep, expansive, and complex learning, the confusion about the meanings of integration may prevent effective widespread implementation.

If you have not read through the curriculum background documents, please do so before reading further.

Background to the Integrated Curriculum

In general, integrating the curriculum has to do with teaching multiple subject matter areas within a particular "unit" of instruction, which can be organized thematically or around a particular project or investigation. However, the way in which such integration occurs varies widely.

Figure 1 shows a quadrant of opposing pairs of dimensions evident in the way curriculum is enacted. Curriculum implementation can vary from a linear and sequential approach to a non-linear and recursive approach. At the same time, curriculum varies along a continuum between total integration and separate subject matter treatment.

Figure 1. The scope of curriculum.

The shaded area in Figure 1 depicts the ideal range for relevant and meaningful curriculum implementation. Essentially, non-linear and recursive approaches are more likely to allow students to develop more meaningful and relevant understandings, whether or not the curriculum is integrated or separated.

Another way of viewing curricular approaches has to do with the continuum from imposed (or mandated) curriculum to emergent curriculum. Figure 2 represents this continuum with the degree (depicted as the shaded area) to which the enacted curriculum is influenced by the teacher and children. Both players affect the curriculum, but ideally the direction of the curriculum is determined by children's questions, interests, and concerns.

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Figure 2. A curricular continuum from imposed (mandated) to emergent.

Yet another way of viewing the curriculum integration appears in Figure 3. In this figure three different approaches to integration are depicted. Procedural integration is where different subject matter areas are simply overlaid. In this approach, teachers may take a particular theme for a unit, then teach each subject around this particular theme. The subjects are still taught separately. A truly thematic integration takes integration a step further in an attempt to examine particular topics and themes from different subject matter perspectives. A conceptual approach to integration attempts to do away with subject matter distinctions in terms of separating instruction into distinctive or discrete units of instructional time. In this case, the development of conceptual understandings spans all subject matter areas. Distinctions between subject matter areas are a matter of discussion about different meanings and approaches to understanding. For example, conceptual integration may take a concept such as cycles and explore, investigate, and analyze different manifestations of cycles in different subject matter contexts, while constantly comparing and contrasting the meanings in different contexts. At the same time, different subject matter areas use different approaches to developing understandings. Such approaches are used as tools for students as they examine cycles in each context.

Figure 3. Integration of curriculum along a continuum from imposed to emergent and from superficial, fragmented, and disconnected to deep, holistic, and connected.

Figure 3 also depicts a continuum from superficial, fragmented, and disconnected learning to deep, holistic, and connected learning. Linear and sequential approaches that typify mandated or imposed curriculum tend to fragment learning. Knowledge is presented as separate bits of information with little connection between these "bits." Covering the curriculum is paramount, while any resulting learning tends to be superficial and disconnected from meaningful and relevant contexts. On the other hand, conceptually integrated approaches to curriculum that encourage student-centered emergence tend to result in deeper, holistic, and highly interconnected understandings.
Other ways of visualizing the differences between various approaches to curriculum appear in Figures 4, 5, and 6.

**Figure 4.** Representation of traditional (separate subject matter) approaches to curriculum. (From: Bloom, 2004)

**Figure 5.** Procedural or thematic approaches to curriculum integration. (From: Bloom, 2004)
Additional Points on Curriculum Integration

A conceptual approach to curriculum integration is essentially an approach to understanding systems and to enacting the curriculum as a system (or as a system of systems). Systems are interconnected and recursive processes.

A conceptual approach to curriculum should focus upon broadly applicable and fundamental concepts. Examples of such concepts can include:

- Metapatterns
- Force
- Power
- Adaptation-Acclimatization
- Regulation
- Variation

References


