

1-1-1997

Book Review: Curriculum and Aims

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Recommended Citation

Magrini, James, "Book Review: Curriculum and Aims" (1997). *Philosophy Scholarship*. Paper 21.
<http://dc.cod.edu/philosophypub/21>

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Book Review

Walker, Decker, F. and Soltis, Jonas, F. (1997). *Curriculum and Aims*.
Teachers College Press, New York. (Third Edition)

There is a need for educational professionals and practitioners to understand the relationship between the function, purpose, and goals of education and the planning, developing, and enacting of the curriculum, which assumes the critical role of structuring effectively the many and varied components of a flourishing educational program. Attempting to analyze and clarify the intricate processes involved when envisioning, constructing, evaluating, and reforming the curriculum, the authors traverse a broad and highly complex spectrum of curriculum issues and problems, including: the debate on educational aims, the concern for the best type of general education to pursue, procedures for effectively making curriculum, and methods for critiquing the curriculum with the potential for successful change and reform.

The book, in a logical and coherent manner, synthesizes a staggering number of curriculum issues for the reader, and yet despite the authors' successful efforts to organize and explain their topic, the reader is left with the undeniable impression that curriculum making is an intricate and highly complex endeavor; it is a formidable task for any educator. For example, even when attempting to decide which sets of basic skills are best to teach, an issue that might be traditionally conceived in terms of reading, writing, and counting, the reader is brought to the realization that these basic issues also include ancillary concerns of an indispensable nature such as the issue of media in relation to education, ethics, physical and psychological health, political and civic responsibility, and a sense of economic awareness.

Seeking to lighten the educator's burden when tackling the challenges of developing a curriculum vision and practice, the authors formalize and advocate for a critical and scholarly approach to curriculum, arguing the indispensable need for a formal philosophical methodology when dealing with curriculum issues. As stated by the authors, it is only through engaging

curriculum in a philosophical manner that we can ever hope to understand, and then work effectively and critically to overcome, the complex problems we face as educators involved in designing and implementing the curriculum, for “only by seeing more deeply into the nature of things are we able to deal more wisely with them, mortally assess them, fully and fairly judge them, and shape them to our purposes” (p. 76).

It must be noted that the authors are aware of and sensitive to the charge of obscurantism that is often lodged against academic philosophy for its role in contributing to the ever-widening gap between theory and practice in education because of its reliance on and incorporation of abstruse jargon, which serves to render its message utterly inaccessible to the general practitioner. This book serves to address this issue and right what the authors perceive as an obvious injustice to the academic philosopher, or curriculum theorist, working in education. Thus, the work employs accessible verbiage and is devoid of highly technical philosophical terminology. One of its aims is undoubtedly to make the issues on curriculum and education, as related to the larger social context, understandable to pre-service and inservice professionals.

Curriculum and Aims works linguistically and conceptually to break open and hold open an inclusive dialogue on the history of curriculum design, implementation, and reform, within which all educators might participate, despite their familiarity with or understanding of academic curriculum theorizing. Indeed, the authors locate the educator in the center of the ongoing curriculum dialogue, with the purpose of inspiring her to think about curriculum in a “larger and more inclusive sense and to see that much of what [they] do as [teachers] is important curriculum work” (p. 2). The authors clearly explain how inquiry of a philosophical nature contributes in a positive manner to ongoing educational debates on curriculum. The final section, “Cases and Disputes” (Chapter 8) is concerned with linking the philosophical and theoretical issues discussed with hypothetical situations, or vignettes, and ‘empirical’ case studies, which serve as a form of quantitative demonstration for the book’s practical

applicability. The overall effectiveness and success of including this section, working in effect to concretize many of the central issues presented in the abstract, attempting to convincingly bridge the gap between theory and practice, will later be assessed.

The book adopts a *historicist* methodology, and as stated above, situates the reader in the locus of the ongoing, evolving dialogue between educators, curriculum specialists, and philosophers of education, all of whom offer legitimate perspectives on curriculum theory and educational practice. Authentic curriculum decisions, the authors conclude, should be “viewed as a continuing dialogue uniting us with our ancestors and with posterity” (p. 31). The curriculum dialogue that structures the book unfolds as dialectic logic, through *dialectic supersession*, a process wherein a position manifests a higher state of existence when its existing form is cancelled or annulled, while at once certain aspects of it are preserved in its new form.¹

This notion of *supersession* is evident in the debate between traditional and progressive educational philosophy, where the societal-centered model in Plato is juxtaposed with Rousseau’s radical notion of subject-centered education, and it is Dewey’s progressive approach that reconciles these two contrary perspectives within a new view to education and curriculum that “serves both aims without either submerging individual development in social needs or providing for individual freedom at the expense of social balance and harmony” (p. 16). The dialectical movement of curriculum’s evolution is also evident in the historical development of curriculum design and construction, which we find in the writings of Tyler, Schwab, and Freire, all of whom have work tirelessly in the service of conceptualizing, philosophizing, and building curriculum. For example, the reader experiences Freire’s emancipatory view of curriculum, in terms of *critical consciousness* or the ‘spiritual’ enlightenment of the student, emerging from the dialectic interplay between Tyler’s technical view of curriculum in critical dialogue with

¹ Ideally, in its Hegelian manifestation, dialectic logic functions in such a way as to preserve elements of all positions involved. Therefore, through its unfolding, the dialectic never totally excludes or outstrips each and every element of the ‘thesis’ or ‘antithesis,’ rather certain aspects of the elements enjoy a new life, which emerges from out of their counter-striving activity, and are thus preserved in the ‘synthesis’.

Schwab's practical approach to curriculum: "Freire's plans for curriculum making is a combination of the procedural and the rationalizing approaches to curriculum determination" (p. 63).

It is only by means of understanding these historical perspectives on curriculum that the educator is prepared to begin authentically conceptualizing the most efficacious manner in which to organize and build her own curriculum, and the process of conceptualizing curriculum emerges, as the authors point out, through research, scholarship, and criticism. For developing a "critical attitude toward curriculum practices is an important thing to do," and further, "it is the only responsible and ethical position for those who are engaged as professionals in the human services of education to adopt" (p. 66). The book offers many unique perspectives on curriculum theory and sound interpretations of philosophical critique, the understanding of which, the authors claim, is crucial to practitioners who are attempting to formulate a more holistic picture of curriculum and its issues, e.g., the authors wisely reference Michael Apple's work in *Ideology and Curriculum*, which represents a sustained ideological critique, arising from the Marxist tradition and continuing on through the critical theorists critique of capitalism.

It is essential for educational professionals to be aware of the political-economic influences on our schools, wherein systems of education are simultaneously 'products' and 'producers' of the state's reigning power structures within curriculum. At times, the processes of political-economic re-production are conspicuous, as in the 'vocationalism' we encounter within *social efficiency* curriculum ideology, but at other times it is not, e.g., when in a more stealth and insidious manner a 'hidden curriculum' is at work beneath the surface. This requires the penetrating eye of the curriculum theorist, who is prepared to dig down in order to perform the philosophical archeology that exposes for critique the inner workings of the curriculum. The authors, importantly, do not skirt the difficult issue concerning the educator's role as advocate

for social justice, which emerges through an authentic commitment to ethical, political, and civic ideals, along with student empowerment.

As stated, the book functions as a discourse between reader and those who have thought and those who are currently thinking on the historical issues of curriculum. In line with what has been said about the educator as advocate for student empowerment, the authors stress the need for tolerant, informed, inclusive debate when dealing with the problems of education. When adjudicating between competing educational theories, they advocate a form of ‘communicative ethics’ in curriculum discourse. In this way, the book addresses the fact that the key to all productive discourse is related to both the content of the discussion and the issue of the discussion’s formal structure; the authors are concerned with both the “what,” or subject-matter, of curriculum, as well as the all-important “how” of curriculum debate, the manner in which the discourse unfolds in the form of just, equitable, and ethical debate. In short, the authors outline for the reader the manner in which respectful and fruitful discourse ‘should’ function within a ‘pluralist’ democratic society, which reveals the concern for a method of interpretation as well as the issue of the structure and value of knowledge as related to education.

The educator involved in the critical conceptualization of curriculum is at once open to the positions and perspectives of others, but also, in a self-aware, reflexive manner, prepared to turn a critical eye inward, to assess rationally and fairly her own positions and ideas, which she brings to the context of debate. And this authentic critical attitude is exceedingly difficult to achieve and maintain, for “it demands a wiliness to reconsider our beliefs and preferences in the course of debate and in light of empathy with other’s experiences and contrary evidence” (p. 38). The educator must at once critically assess her own position while processing and objectively evaluating the contrary beliefs, opinions, and educational preferences of others with whom she is discoursing.

When outlining the *commonplaces* of education, the authors point out, rather than three in number, as traditionally conceived, there are in fact four perspectives from out of which curriculum springs: knowledge-centered, student-centered, societal-centered, and problem-centered, as we find in *social reconstruction* curriculum philosophy. As the authors demonstrate, although there might be a disparity between the *commonplaces*, there also exist elements of each that overlap, for example, concerns with knowledge, or teaching-content, and the goal of improving the society cannot be overlooked even by those perspectives favoring a student-centered model for curriculum. The issue, as the authors rightly point out, “is one of priorities and balance among goals and perspectives all of which have something to contribute” (p. 37). Educators involved in curriculum debate must take into account a multitude of views, each with unique implications, each with something of value to offer, and so they require an intelligence that is attune to the complexity and subtleties of the positions they are considering.

Ultimately, an authentic view to knowledge in curriculum debate is grounded in tolerance and the ‘rational’ consensus of those involved in the context of discourse, and the realization that one correct answer might not exist, as there are no clear lines between what is true categorically and false unquestionably. Although the authors do not make this explicit, they are really drawing the important distinction between the *Either/Or* and the *Both/And* epistemological clusters, and are arguing that the decisions we make as educators, related to the questions of what type of curriculum best serves our students, are based in an epistemological view that embraces a multiplicity of perspectives, as in the *Both/And* view of knowledge. For when choosing between competing aims, the educator must be aware of the decisions that “seem good from several perspectives and to consider the best tradeoffs of one good for another in their particular circumstances,” and when she has done this, she is in a position to “state clearly what are the pros and cons of each decision and explain the grounds for choosing one rather than another” (p. 37).

Curriculum and Aims makes a significant contribution to contemporary curriculum studies for at least three reasons: First, it situates the issues associated with curriculum making within an historical context, within a confluence of competing political-social-economic forces, and it addresses the influence of the critical theorists, ideological critique, and media studies on the curriculum process, which includes the growing concern with education as a means to achieve social justice. Next, it makes the reader aware of the indispensable role of a critical philosophical method in the realm of curriculum debate within a ‘pluralist’ democratic society, for it is only by means of an historically informed perspective that educators are able to see beyond the narrow and limited confines of their own historical moment, opening them up to other ways of viewing education, “suggesting that these different views might again be valid if similar circumstances prevailed,” while at once understanding the “historical circumstances that gave rise to a certain point of view enables us to ask now whether these views continue to be pertinent to our situation today” (p. 30). Finally, it offers a highly accessible inroad for practitioners into the complex and dense field of curriculum scholarship, and indeed masterfully distills the essence of the philosophical positions discussed without sacrificing the weight or import of the arguments. In doing so, with the inclusion of the final chapter, which contains realistic vignettes, dialogues, and case studies, the authors suggest that a maneuverable bridge between theory and practice, thinking and doing, in education might be constructed.

On this last point, however, two concerns arise: First, whether or not, with the inclusion of the final chapter containing the numerous empirical case studies, the book overextends itself. To the point, in the authors’ inspired attempt to melt theory and practice, they present a somewhat disingenuous picture of educational theory in general to practitioners who might have no idea of the difference between the ways in which specific theories function, depending on the discipline, depending on the realm of investigation; and second, whether or not the detailed case

studies were truly required in order to “raise a number of issues not dealt with directly or at length in the text” (p. 97).

To begin with the second concern, the case studies, although well-intentioned, and beyond, necessary if indeed the abstract nature of the philosophical speculation can be effectively concretized in practice, came off as slightly contrived, in terms of representing a superfluous and unnecessary adjunct to an otherwise solid effort on curriculum aims, issues, and philosophy. Admittedly, the book, for the sake of thoroughness, includes the final section with case studies and ‘quantitative’ practical examples, however, it is the case that the many questions for further thought and debate, which the authors set out at the conclusion of each chapter, were more than sufficient to inspire any concerned educator to engage the problems, issues, and concerns of curriculum building in light of the philosophical ground that was already so thoroughly covered by the authors in the other sections of the book. Adding this final section seemed to clutter and confuse what was an otherwise lucid and streamlined effort.

With respect to the first concern, I could not help thinking when reading the authors’ description of Herbert Kliebard’s critique of the Tyler rationale, which is reducible to the smuggling in of value judgments under the guise of a pseudo-empirical theory, that the authors were guilty of a similar misrepresentation of educational theory. I feel as if the book gives the false impression that the potential exists for educational theory to be like scientific theory, which is to say, that curriculum theory, if conceptualized and approached properly, as presented in this book, holds the potential to describe, explain, and ultimately, with an inflated sense of confidence, predict and control the outcome of events.

In fairness to the authors, they take great care outlining the way in which our assumptions and recommendations for a sound education inform the theory in question, and that these assumptions and recommendations are eventually scrutinized through a process of critique that occurs across a multitude of varying levels. The informed reader can take from this the

indication that it is indeed possible to test an educational theory and either accept or reject it based on determining the soundness of its claims for (a) the aims of education, (b) testable assumptions about students and how they best learn, and (c) philosophically sound assumptions about knowledge theory. Indeed, the fact that much of the material is presented in the mode of the interrogative, in the form of critical questions that allow the reader to draw her own conclusions regarding the best ways in which to approach the many and varied interrelated components of curriculum, which are grounded in a thoroughly informed perspective, testifies that the authors clearly understand the nature of educational theory.

However, since the book is written specifically for preservice and in-service practitioners, it would have been helpful to include at least one section, perhaps in “Conceptualizing Curriculum Phenomena” (Chapter 4), which explains for the reader the nature, form, and function of educational theory in general. All too often, educators wrongly conflate and confuse educational theory with ‘scientific theory,’ which works explicitly to tell us, importantly, how the world ‘is,’ how things operate, and through induction, what to expect in the future. Education theory, and this includes theorizing on the curriculum, falls under the categorization of ‘practical’ theory, and going back to Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics*, practical theory suggests to us what we ‘ought’ to be doing in *praxis*, where things can always be otherwise. Concomitant with this functional difference is the issue of validation: Practical recommendations for a specified program of education (or, as in Aristotle, a prescribed course of ‘virtuous’, moral action) cannot be verified in exactly the same manner as empirical theory; practical theory does not admit of proof in the same way, for practical knowledge does not reside on the same epistemological plane.

In a book that strives and succeeds in so many aspects to make the ‘esoteric’ in curriculum theorizing accessible, or ‘exoteric’, to practitioners, it would have been wise to explicitly draw out the difference between educational theory and the other forms of theory we

encounter in science and mathematics for the reader. What might appear on the surface as a subtle difference, is in fact monumental, and these are the types of crucial distinctions, which the authors point out, careful and critical philosophy must strive to analyze and understand, for such distinctions can spell the difference between 'sound' and 'unsound' approaches to educational/curriculum issues great and small.