

Trends in Understanding Curriculum: A post-1980s Analysis

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Abstract



The field of curriculum has been defined in a number of ways in different time frames. In the post-1980s period, the debate about curriculum analysis becomes significant when scores of approaches question the scope of curriculum as being merely a political text at the expense of providing due share to the significant societal issues of class, gender, and race. Focusing on the post-1980s period, this article presents curriculum analysis around the intertwined question of status quo and change which run parallel in the name of identity, nationhood, global citizenship, social equity, empowerment, etc. Based on the analysis of historiographical accounts of the post-1980s period, the data findings reveal that the field of curriculum analysis from 1980s onwards has turned from being a tight-bound structured being into an organic entity. The article reveals that discussions about curriculum analysis do not only suggest the acceptance or rejection of the power structures influencing the school curricula but these also look at the change prospects in the prevailing knowledge forms that may benefit and/or empower the deprived sections of society. Consequently, the emergent analysis signifies the fact that given multiple explanations about the scope of curriculum, curriculum analysis turns into a complicated conversation happening between and among all the stakeholders analysing it as a present contrivance devised in the light of the past but with an eye on the future.

Keywords: Curriculum Analysis; Post-modern Critical Period; Curriculum Change and Status Quo

Introduction

The field of curriculum is explained as an organic whole that has gone through the pre-traditionalist period (from 1890s to 1920s), the traditionalist period (from 1920s to 1950s), the reconceptualist period (from 1960s to 1980s), and the postmodern critical period (from 1980s onward); hence evolved into its present form (Janesick, 2003). Moon calls this as a ‘fascinating period’, emphasising social constructivist thought in curriculum design and giving shape to the action research practice in the implemented aspects of curriculum (2003, p. 11). Writing in early 1990s about the prospects of postmodern approach in understanding curriculum, Doll believes in its capacity to bringing about ‘megaparadigmatic changes’ in the field of curriculum (Marsh, 2009, p. 273). Hence, seen in the 21st century context, curriculum is explained in ethical, aesthetic, autobiographical, spiritual, theological, discursive, phenomenological, gender, racial, and institutional connotations (Pinar et al., 2008; Janesick, 2003). In general terms, curriculum is understood as a product of thoughts, feelings and actions of people in a society. In more specific academic terms, it entails a set of organised formal intentions of education adopted in a state (Kennedy, 2005, p. 84). To curriculum analysts like Pinar (2004), the school curricula signify transmission of cultural values of a society from one generation to another. Notwithstanding its ‘literal and institutional meanings’, curriculum has been analysed as, what Pinar calls, ‘a highly symbolic concept’ that may entail multiple meanings (2004, p.185). Therefore, there are scores of approaches analysing the process of curriculum making, its organisation into subjects, and their reform in response to the changes in socio-political, economic and certainly educational contexts. This article covers the post-1980s debate because this period is significant for the existence of the contending visions of curriculum analysis around the demands for status quo and change.

Scope and Significance

The scope of this article rests in providing an analytic account of the post-1980s debate about curriculum as a manifestation of status quo versus emancipatory or resistance-led change. The discussion is delimited to the post-1980s debate about curriculum with reference to the on-going post-positivist and the emerging critical theory trends defining curriculum. Therefore, the period under

discussion holds a historical significance in the field of approaches explaining curriculum trends. The post-1980s period questions curriculum as being a political text with reference to its negligence of important societal issues of class, gender, race, etc. The debate signifies the on-going demands for adding the postmodernist, poststructuralist, and phenomenological facets into the curriculum debate.

Research Question

What are the trends in understanding curriculum in the post-1980s period?

Research design

This article seeks support from the research methodology of conceptual papers (Jaakkola, 2020; Hullah, 2020). The research strategy of this article is assimilative, i.e., sifting out and bringing in the post-1980s theoretical concepts and arguments under the fold of either status quo or change oriented trends. The two trends are treated, what Jaakkola (2020) explains, as the focal phenomena which can be observed in the existing literature but these need to be adequately addressed with their distinctive orientations.

Analysis and Discussion

Data findings of this article are based on the published curriculum debate in the post-positivist traditions highlighting trends of continuity in the school curricula as well as the curriculum debate followed in the critical theory traditions focusing on trends demanding for change in the school curricula. Although the debate of curriculum continuity and change paradoxically run parallel in the name of identity, nationhood, global citizenship, social equity, empowerment, etc., the following presents curriculum analysis around the intertwined question of status quo and change into two separate sections:

Understanding curriculum in status quo oriented trends

It is believed in the post-positivist traditions that curriculum is something more resilient than anything else. In this reference, the modernist approaches deal with the fixedness of curricular patterns of school knowledge which are devised in nationalistic terms. Their argument rest in the claim that formal school curricula are designed keeping in view the significance of the identities associated with a given nation-state. Kennedy believes that schools have been one of ‘the most enduring social institutions’ (2005, p. 17, and p. 99). In other words, it is the givenness of nation-states as being ‘the contemporary units’ which determine the structure and content of the school curricula and knowledge forms (Kamens and Benavot, 1991, p. 141). Although politicians and bureaucracy compete to legitimise their respective ideology of educational change, the bureaucratic structure usually tends to absorb and or influence the intended changes proposed by the political leadership so as to maintain the status quo.

Some curriculum analysts focus their discussion on the curriculum content in the prescribed school textbooks that are taught with a view to understanding how the official version of nationhood is disseminated among students. To them, the central governments are the major authorities to determine change and to introduce new subjects in schools even in the decentralised states like Britain and states with durable local decision-making structures (Skillbeck, 1984, p. 6). School subjects get their legitimacy through political approval, institutional adjustment and/or will, and in some societies, from public consent as well. To Crossley and Murby (1994, pp. 99-114), the prescribed textbooks certainly hold a political significance to such an extent that these are described as the curriculum.

The question of maintaining the status quo has often been discussed in the post-positivist writings with reference to secondary schools that are often described as so inflexible and impervious to change that the changing demands of time may stay least attended in educational practice. This has been felt especially true about the modernist schooling system where the ‘innovative ideal’ mostly faces death vis-à-vis what is called ‘entrenched knowledge and practices’ (MacDonald, 2003, p. 139). This can equally be said for the state-run schooling system where education policies are the sole safeguards for keeping the established socio-political norms of society intact. However, this does not mean that no change can ever take place at all. Because socio-political power relations and norms of societies at both national and global levels have never been static, so is true for adopting/retaining or changing specific curricular knowledge traditions being followed in schools.

The advocates of the ‘world polity perspectives’ indicate the effects of global trends on the curriculum organisation of a given society (Kamens and Benavot, 1991, p. 141). To them, the question of analysing comparative curricular patterns of different nations may apparently indicate diversity and heterogeneity, this may equally involve the effects of global phenomena on the

organisation of school curriculum that may make the latter similar to curriculum organisations of other states. To Kamens and Benavot (1991, p. 141), mass school curricula are closely linked to 'emergent models of society and education that have become relatively standardized around the world'. And that because of the standardization of adopting models of global mass knowledge, the local and national influences become secondary to the global cultural effects on the curriculum. Taking the issue specifically to the case of curriculum reform in schools, the modernist studies have explained the phenomenon of change in their own way.

To MacDonald, the modernist explanation for curriculum reform involves a structured knowledge activity in a given timeframe which is 'directed, purposive, systematic, and intentional change', perceiving learners as users of the official school curricula for the sake of establishing a controlled and representative social order believing in equality for all (2003, pp. 142-143). Different theories such as Michael Apple's 'identity theory', and/or Bernstein's pedagogic discourse have guided such explanations with a 'particular view of schooling, learning, and young people that is essentially modernist' (MacDonald, 2003, p. 143). Saying that, the end 20th century developments also speak for the co-existing traditions of curriculum analysis following critical theory that explain the adoption of knowledge as something promoting the interest of the few; hence calling for change in the existing knowledge traditions.

Understanding curriculum in change-oriented trends

Central to critical theory perspectives are the issues of power relations, and resistance leading to the call for the emancipation of unduly dominated identity expressions being followed in the formal expressions of school knowledge. Since late 1970s, taking up their start as progressivists, the curriculum analysts have moved on with re-defining the scope of curriculum in critical theory traditions. In this reference, calling themselves as 'cultural workers', curriculum analysts like Jean Anyon, Michael Apple, Henry Giroux, Young and Whitty have focussed their writings towards upholding the cause of social change as being closely tied with educational change (Anyon, 1994, p. 115). Critical theorists like Henry Giroux have added several changed connotations with the term modernism. Taken in Giroux terms, modernity requires a referral to social, aesthetic, and political aspects; with their focus on progress, the positive outcomes of scientific advancements, and a stern devotion to pragmatic solutions for problems (Pinar, 2008, p. 507). Identifying the progressive elements of postmodernism, Giroux upholds the political modernist criteria of justice, democracy, and human rights emphasizing a recognition of a number of previously unheard or silenced voices. To Pinar, such critical theory claims call for such postmodernist movements that ensure the 'production of new forms of knowledge that contest the modernist construction of knowledge' (2008, p. 508).

To curriculum analysts following critical theory traditions, curriculum organisation in any state involves the dynamics of political control over the social life of citizens (Carrie, 2000, p. 6); that is exercised for establishing or re-establishing 'national identity' (Goodson, Anstead, and Mangan, et al. 1998, p. 151). Along with postmodernists, two schools of thought explain the identity dynamics that determine the nature and implementation of curriculum in schools. The first group comprises the advocates of the feminist and neo-Marxist approaches analysing curriculum with intent to tease out the power structures relating to identity and legitimacy politics that underlie the organisation of curriculum content. To them, the formal education system in states devise specific education policies which favour particular curricula versus others. Some states prefer academic subjects over the utilitarian subjects which 'are less valued, receive fewer resources and are offered to less-able students' (Ayalon, 1994, p. 264-278). Hence, at times, an undesirable hierarchy is created within the curriculum with the ranking of school subjects.

Another explanation for hierarchical manifestation is offered at intra-curriculum level of curriculum content where, within a unified curriculum, there are dominant and subordinate paths that can also be described as gendered binaries (Saigol, 1995). These gendered binaries are manifested in what is called 'the paranoid curriculum'; that is prepared with an objective to 'framing an identity which is then imposed upon an individual' and removing those experiential knowledge aspects which are believed to redundant or unwanted (Schostak, 2000, pp. 41-42).

The central argument in both the above-mentioned schools of thought is that these explain the school curriculum as 'a bounded construct' attending to particular individual, socio-political or economic needs which are upheld in the name of national interest and development (Kennedy, 2005, p. 33). Although such studies explain the exercise of a power dynamic that is manifested in the content of

textbooks, these tend to miss the very process of defining educational ideologies that underlie the creation of school curricula before their practical manifestation within textbooks. These ideological tendencies decide about adopting a particular form of curriculum in a given period of time.

The curriculum policy analysts like Carrie present their understanding of curriculum as what develops as a result of discussions among power groups to decide about intended educational change in school curriculum (2000, p. 6). In fact, policy-makers make use of the existing culture of the society to formulate a policy so as to get more support from the community; that serves the purpose of social integration. The school curricula are therefore described as 'nationally patterned collections of socially approved knowledge' which require a thorough evaluation (Benavot et al., 1991, p. 86). Jansen believes that such evaluation may involve both micro and macro levels of control which might have worked towards 'two dimensions: curriculum change and curriculum continuity' (1990, p. 196).

In more general terms, the politics of curriculum involves power as 'a dialectical force' that 'empowers and disempowers' both the dominant and the dominated individuals and groups (Goodson, 1997, pp. xxii-xxiii). Though paradoxical, the disempowered is empowered by the already empowered to serve the purpose of the already empowered. When taken in Foucauldian terms, this power phenomenon may also refer to the power of resistance on the part of those whose say remain unattended while deciding about the organisation of curriculum. Various other approaches have been analysing changes in the nature and content of formal schooling with specific reference to formal curriculum; post-colonialism is one of these (Marsh, 2004, pp. 223-233). The question of validity of colonialism and its consequent corollary neo-colonialism for the post-independence context of many former colonial states has exercised the minds of curriculum analysts. Too often they tend to define schools as implements of maintaining colonial relationships between the colonial rulers and the colonised people by serving as crucial support mechanism to the colonial state in implementing and disseminating 'specific belief systems and cultural associations' (Valenzuela, 1999. Cited in Matus, and McCarthy, 2003, p. 75). According to King, Houston, and Middleton (2001, p. 429), 'the stories of cultural achievements are perpetuated through school curricula' in such a way that 'school curricula marginalise the contributions' of indigenous people vis-à-vis the 'accomplishments' of their colonial masters; that in turn creates 'distorted national identities'. Referring to Franz Fanon's arguments, Kempf reinstates that deriving a decisive strength from 'educational imperialism' the past of the colonized people was not only distorted and disfigured but it was rather destroyed; hence impacting upon the lives of the colonized (2006, p. 132).

The evolution of knowledge forms practiced in the schools of colonial states are also discussed in some discourses with reference to particular forms of imperialism that had existed during 18th through to early 20th century. For instance, the history of the French and British Empires reveal that the focus of attention in these systems was to fulfil their purposes of political and administrative rather than economic necessities in their colonies. Cowen highlights that particular knowledge forms were maintained that could promise the maintenance of the supremacy of the colonial rule and at the same time produce a 'carefully selected local elites' to assist the imperial governments in maintaining their rule over the masses (1996, p. 156). Moreover, educational patterns devised for colonial states were not "'nationally' distributed", which kept the majority of population illiterate (Cowen, 1996, p.157). The debate about colonial curriculum is further taken up in some anti-colonial discourses with a view to inquire not only about the ills of colonial knowledge but to find out the consequent resistance and hence emancipation movements in the colonized world demanding curriculum change. According to analysts like Dei (2006, p. 1), 'an anti-colonial struggle must identify and define a political project and show its connections to the academic engagement'.

Thésée explains that for the sake of establishing and maintaining their rule, the colonizers had created knowledge about the colonised populations on their own terms. Referring to Said's emphasis, Thésée emphasises, 'the knowledge produced by Europeans about subordinated people is shaped within the configurations of power and domination between' the colonisers and the colonised (2006, p. 33). Moreover, according to the followers of Marxist philosophy, central to anti-colonial approach is the need for change; "'what matters is not to know the world but to change it'" as Franz Fanon and Karl Marx both insist (Dei, 2006, p. 1). Saying this, Dei believes that because it might be naïve to look for the possibility of a complete departure from colonial practices in the post-colonial contexts. Hence, as Dei argues that some other critical anti-colonial theorists cum analysts tend to investigate about the question of the extent to which the legacies of the colonial and/or neo-colonial may continue

or discontinue in the post-independence context of nation-states (2006, p. 2).

Analysing colonial education in India in the light of Bhaba's philosophy, colonial education had claimed to bring liberation of Indians from their social evils. But that 'normalising' aspect of colonial India in turn had also set the ground for the production of their own knowledge system promising liberation from the colonial masters and a strong socio-economic standing among other communities of the world (Chambers, 2003, p. 6). At this point, some curriculum analysts would may hold that schools, specifically public schools, lack 'a coherent mission' due to the interplay of global and/or national political and academic 'diverse forces, values, and goals' shaping education in schools (Wiggins, and McTighe, 2007, p. 12). Saying this, curriculum change cannot be explained as some random activity. Explaining the change dynamics, post-modernist traditions speak for the cultural construction of schooling that happen as an ongoing process keeping in view the changing demands of time and space with reference to positioning the individual learner in his/her socio-historical existence in a particular state and beyond (MacDonald, 2003). For them curriculum change is not something sudden and abrupt, but an organic on-going activity which needs to take on-board the interests of all irrespective of their socio-political, economic, strategic and gender positioning.

Conclusion

To conclude, the post-1980s period depicts the epistemic significance of curriculum analysis. It reveals a pattern of transition in the debate from seeing curriculum as merely a static, structured whole to a dynamic being. Such dynamism not only signifies the existence of and resistance against the power structures shaping the school curricular but also explores the possibilities of change in the existing knowledge traditions for the sake of empowering the disempowered and/or the underprivileged sections of society. Although the curriculum debate in the post 1980s context tends to become complex, such complexity brings forward the need for acknowledging the fact that gone are the days when a purely traditionalist curriculum could be left with the top hierarchy to decide what to teach and what not to teach in schools. It also reveals that the phenomenon of curriculum stability and change was and is becoming more so a matter of symbolic control. Such symbolic control tends to make curriculum, what Pinar calls 'a complicated conversation'; which is going to happen between and among all being effected by its utterance as 'an ethical, political, always intellectual undertaking' of the present with an eye on the future but in the light of the past (2012, p. 50). In short, the present day 21st century curriculum is used with multiple connotations which cannot be an exclusive domain of either traditionalists with their emphasis on basic literacy skills, or experientialists supporting the cause of active learning, or even the poles apart critical theorists looking for emancipatory dimensions of curriculum (Janesick, 2003; Marsh, 2009). And the credit for making curriculum such an inclusive domain goes to the on-going debate of post-1980s period delving deep into the then issues of curriculum while making assessments of the lags in the past and anticipating about the futuristic needs of time to come.

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