

To 'Curriculum' Or Not To 'Curriculum'

As William Shakespeare's famous saying "To be or not to be" reveals the dilemma that has always faced mankind, today the word 'curriculum' evokes the same dilemma for academicians. Despite the wide usage of curriculum almost to the point of everyday academic jargon, remarkably there are enough differences in definitions to bewilder academicians themselves. The question that academicians faced today is "To curriculum or not to curriculum". Just what is curriculum? To the Romans during Caesar's time, curriculum means the oval-shaped race track which thousands of Romans gathered to watch chariot races and the heroics of gladiators performing life and death duels with one another. Today, curriculum has a totally different meaning and performs a totally different function. This paper attempts to look at the concept of curriculum from the sociological, philosophical as well as historical point of view. It is the author's stand that an incarcerated view of curriculum could lead to possible long-term devastation of society and nation. Before an attempt is made to define curriculum, we shall discuss the purpose of education and schooling and the role plays vis-à-vis the society and its members as this has direct link to the understanding of the concept of curriculum.

Early Education and Schooling

A distinction is made here between the difference education and schooling. "Education" refers to the process of learning in one's entire life that begins at birth and continues through formal and informal settings till one's last breath. Schooling refers to the process of learning through formal institutions. While education is primary an individual's domain, schooling is a social or group process.

DIGGING INTO CURRICULUM MANAGEMENT: CONCEPTUALIZING CURRICULUM

As has been stated, education comes before schooling. The earliest educational systems were everyday events. Sons were admonished to keep their fathers' commandments and not forsake their mothers' teachings. They were to bind the commandments and teachings upon their hearts and tie them their necks so that when they walk, these commandments and teaching will lead them; when they lie down, they will watch over them; and when they are awake, they will talk with them. In the stone age, a boy learned to hunt by following his father, he learned to chip flints by watching adults. The daughter followed the mother in collecting edible roots and fruits and received instruction on how to dress the kills.

The island of Ponape which lies northeast of New Guinea exhibits a unique form of informal education. Children were encouraged to help out with family chores as soon as they were able to walk. Play groups become the next important source of education. While playing, they mimic adult behaviour and learn social rules. The fundamental rule of Ponapean education is the integration of learning with real life situations. Children learn by observing and participating when they were ready. Their readiness to learn is very much self-determined and do not involve just the listening process but the active participation with the environment.

Education in the Islamic world emphasized on religious training in the reading and practicing of the holy scriptures and laws. Great strides were made too on secular pursuits in poetry, philosophy and science.

In China, the earlier educated men were diviners or sages. They read oracles for the court and probably passed their skills along through apprenticeship. When the writing system was developed, such great masters like Confucius, Lao Tzu

and many other teachers were directed to train advisors for the courts. The aesthetic form of expression through literary skills and calligraphy were highly touted and sought after.

In India, knowledge of the Vedic traditions was monopolized by the Brahmins, thus ostracizing other castes and steadfastly legitimizing the caste system. For these Brahmins, education was practical training in religious and magic skills, poetry, drama, and dance classes.

The Heian court of early Japanese civilization emphasized on the elaborate culture of poetry writing and art appreciation developed by men and women courtiers.

From the above examples, the common thread that links education in different societies and civilizations is the maintenance and transmission of culture. It is man's instinct for survival of his kind that motivates him to pass on the culture to the next generation to ensure that there is continuity. Culture refers to both the accumulated knowledge in every field and the values, beliefs and norms. Such transmission of culture was primarily the responsibility of the family through informal ways as has been described above.

As man's store of knowledge expands and the society he lives in becomes more complex, the need for a more formal way of transmitting the accumulated culture becomes more important. The well to-do family began to hire scholars to tutor and train their children in the knowledge and skills that were desirable to attain recognition and maintenance of their social status. Thus the concept of 'school' came into being. It is interesting to note that the word 'school' in the early days meant 'leisure' because indeed, it was for filling their children's time with academic

DIGGING INTO CURRICULUM MANAGEMENT: CONCEPTUALIZING CURRICULUM

pursuits but today, the meaning of 'school' to many, meant the other end of the continuum, which is, 'torture'. Public schools became more prominent after the Industrial Revolution, where the shift from agrarian economy to that of industrial economy, opens up a whole new world of mass production to meet the skills and knowledge required.

The Roles of Education and Schooling

The key issue that we have to be clear about is: Is there really a great difference between 'what' and 'how' culture is transmitted in education and schooling? We shall discuss two functions of the school and family in the transmission of culture to the new generation.

Both the family and the school are socializing agents that train the child to be socially adapted to become functional members of society. The socialization roles of the family and the school are not separate and exclusive. Socialization involves much more than the learning of skills and the acquisition of knowledge. Without doubt the most important part of socialization involves the unconscious assimilation and internalization of beliefs, values and patterns of behaviour deemed desirable in one's contacts with others.

Though we do not deny the fact that there can be conflicting and competing differences in the type of beliefs, values and patterns of behaviour between the family and school, nevertheless the functional role of the socialization process is the same. What we call subjects, or field of knowledge, rules and regulations, and norms in schools are basically a formal and regimented representation of the more simplified forms found

in the home. What the family propagates as good behaviour and values through family roles interaction is represented in school through subjects like Moral, Civics and in the rules and regulations governing student behaviour.

Learning skills of subsistence in the early education are translated into subjects like Agriculture Science, Home Science, Commerce, and Industrial Arts in the school. In higher institution of learning, skills of subsistence are translated into specific fields like medicine, architecture, engineering and others. Thus we have the first similarity between the family and school through the socialization roles; that is the curricular intentions are the same.

The second function of the family and school is to teach and train. Green's continuum of teaching offers us a very interesting view of how we transmit culture and ideology. From diagram 1 teaching is viewed as a continuum where on one end is 'physical threat' and the other end is 'lying'. I have put in another method in the teaching continuum which is 'modelling'. As has been discussed in the way early education was practiced, children learn by observing and participating when they are ready.

Society, government, family and school use one or more of the methods on the continuum in the transmission of culture, and ideology to the next generation. Governments like the communists have used propaganda, indoctrination and even physical threat in the transmission of their ideology to their citizen. Families have used instructing, training modelling, conditioning, physical threat and even lying in transmitting culture to their children. Schools too have used training, instructing, conditioning, physical threat, modelling and

DIGGING INTO CURRICULUM MANAGEMENT: CONCEPTUALIZING CURRICULUM

sometimes even lying by individual teachers to transmit culture to the students.

In the most noble intention of training students through the science of pedagogy, teachers at some time or another would have resorted to physical threat and intimidation in trying to instill learning to take place. The same goes with parents' noble intentions of training their young charges; they would have at some point used physical threat and even lying to protect their children from harm. Without doubt, children learn more through modeling their parents, peers and teachers. It does not matter whether the science of pedagogy is used in schools or role-interactions are used by the family because the goal is that culture must be transmitted. Therefore the second similarity between the functional roles of the school and family is how culture is transmitted. This then brings us to the definition of curriculum.

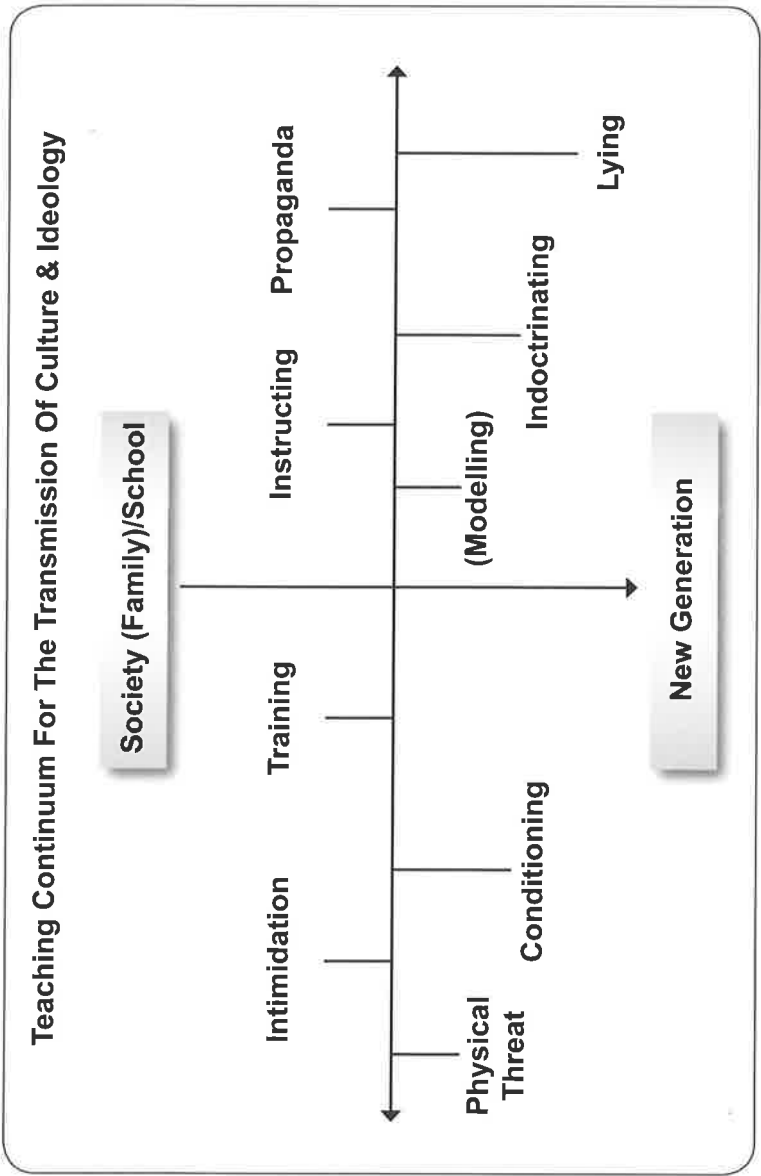


Diagram 1

DIGGING INTO CURRICULUM MANAGEMENT: CONCEPTUALIZING CURRICULUM

Definition Of Curriculum

Consideration of the curriculum must include its purpose, content, method, organization and evaluation (McNeil 1985). We shall first look at some of the definitions put forward by curriculum scholars.

"Program of studies, program of experiences, program of services and the hidden curriculum"

Albert I. Oliver

"An organized set of formal education and/or training intentions"

David Pratt

"That series of things which children and youth must do and experience"

Franklin Bobbit

"All elements in the experience of the learner"

Caswell & Campbell

From the definitions above, curriculum could be viewed from a continuum where one end is that of a planned/written programme to the other end of the continuum which includes learning experiences which are not necessarily planned. The wide range of definitions is fathomable because curriculum is a single word which is used to describe a series of extensive concepts which include content, teaching, learning and

experiences. It is like trying to use the definition of sports to describe all the competitive, non-competitive, leisure, amateur, professional, indoor and outdoor games. Nevertheless, the understanding and definition of curriculum is not as muddle as is believed.

There is a general consensus belief that curriculum is that which is taught and what students must learn in schools. However, such an incarcerated belief could lead to serious misunderstanding that curriculum refers to subjects that are taught and tested. The association that 'curriculum is subjects and subjects is curriculum' can be no further than the truth that 'God is love and love is God'. The implications can be devastating. Therefore I would like to put forward another definition of curriculum that stems from our discussion of the functions of the family and school or of education and schooling.

We have discussed that the first similarity between the family and school through their socialization roles is the same curricular intentions. Both the family and school have the same socialization intention of transmitting culture to the next generation. As has been discussed, only the forms are different in the subsistence skills, values and norms. If we associate curriculum as a planned programme of studies (subject matters), dare we say that no curriculum was propagated in the family in their socialization of their children because the socialization process was not planned? The curricular intentions of the family are never in doubt because the results were there to be seen in the way children learn from the socialization process. The family seldom plans for learning to take place but learning takes place all the time. Society evaluates the family's standing by the way their children behave and live in society. Therefore my first proposition is that curriculum is not necessarily a written programme (subjects).

DIGGING INTO CURRICULUM MANAGEMENT: CONCEPTUALIZING CURRICULUM

The second similarity between the functional roles of the school and family is how culture is transmitted. It does not matter whether the science of pedagogy is used in schools or role-interactions are used by the family because the goal is that culture must be transmitted. As has been discussed, culture is transmitted more by children's observations, modelling and participation which is definitely not confined to the classroom. Children learn the subsistence skills through content (subjects) as well as the way the contents are taught. A teacher who comes into the classroom teaching living skills by using intimidation more often than training will discourage rather than encourage mastery of the contents. A teacher who eulogizes good moral values through planned instructions in the class but practices the opposite outside the class will serve as a stronger negative model than a positive model. The unplanned learning experiences of the students were stronger than the planned learning experiences. Students may receive evaluation on how he has learned moral values through examinations but the real evaluation is how he internalizes moral values through modelling or observation.

My next proposition is that curriculum is all the experiences of the learner within and outside the classroom. Therefore I would like to put forward the following definition of curriculum.

"Curriculum is all the planned and unplanned learning experiences of the learner within and outside the classroom".

David Ng Foo Seong

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