Chapter 8

CURRICULUM AS A FIELD OF STUDY

Curriculum as a field of study is a third way the term *curriculum* is used. Curriculum study may include curriculum design, curriculum engineering, curriculum evaluation, curriculum theory and research, foundational backgrounds, and cognitive disciplines. Curriculum as a field of study is one customarily engaged in by graduate students and instructional personnel at colleges and universities. On a less concentrated basis, participants in inservice curriculum programs in schools during the time of their involvement belong in this category.

As we have stated or implied a number of times previously, the field of curriculum is a morass of undefined concepts used without careful definition by many. And when basic concepts are not selected and defined carefully, the boundaries between curriculum and other components of education become blurred. This is true particularly with respect to the boundaries and relationships among curriculum, instruction, evaluation, and learning. Distinctions made in earlier chapters emphasized the need for identifying unique properties and functions. There are many, however, who reject the idea that distinctions should be made among curriculum, instruction, evaluation, and learning. There also are differences in opinion about the domain of a curriculum. We refer here to the use of a single subject, or a discipline, as *curriculum*, such as mathematics curriculum, versus the use of *curriculum* as a referent to the entire program of a school.

In this kind of situation, certain of the theoretical issues in the field can best be noted by an analysis of the conditions and circumstances within the field as revealed in curriculum literature.

CURRICULUM TEXTBOOKS AND COURSES

One way of appraising the field of curriculum is to examine treatments of the field given in textbooks written on curriculum. One type is a wide-coverage book dealing primarily with curriculum development but including chapters on curriculum foundations, curriculum content, and curriculum design. A significant portion of this type of book is devoted to the topics treated in the previous chapter on curriculum engineering.

Another type is the curriculum book that discusses the content and organization of school subjects. These may also have one or more chapters devoted to curriculum planning.

A third type is one in which topics are treated as though curriculum and instruction should be regarded as a common domain. These customarily contain discussions of content, materials of instruction, and modes of teaching for each of the school subjects. Textbooks such as these often contain discussions of administrative organization including nongradedness, tracking, team teaching, and a brief discussion of planning.

Many curriculum books vary from these types by combining elements of each and by diverse treatments of fundamental curriculum concepts. Books of readings in curriculum contain the greatest mixtures of all.

When publishers produce textbooks on curriculum, they do so in the belief that they will be used in college and university courses, and they generally are. The implication here is that courses must vary as much in purpose and content as the textbooks do. Altman analyzed the positions taken by authors on curriculum planning.[1] He developed a model for classifying treatments of objectives in curriculum planning and the activities recommended for achieving those objectives. Altman found great differences in both objectives and activities for curriculum planning in the various positions. Content variation in curriculum planning books is an indication that similar variation takes place in courses devoted to curriculum development.

Range and variation in curriculum course offerings is another indication of the confusion that reigns in the field of curriculum.

[1] Burton E. Altman, "An Identification and Classification of Selected Characteristics of Cooperative Curriculum Planning Positions from 1918 to 1965" (Doctoral dissertation, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, 1965).

The condition of course offerings in curriculum is typified by a study of Bateman.[2] He surveyed the course offerings in elementary curriculum offered by universities having undergraduate programs in elementary teacher education. The results of the study dramatically pointed out that content variation is a characteristic of such courses. In elementary teacher education, the courses tend to cover the whole gamut of elementary education.

Wootton also surveyed curriculum offerings in teacher education institutions.[3] He reported many observations similar to those of Bateman. Wootton, however, was more convinced than Bateman that the language of curriculum is being refined. Later, Wootton and Selwa noted increased difficulty in identifying any body of content to which every student of curriculum should be exposed.[4] Then in a third survey, Wootton, Reynolds, and Lopp found offerings in the curriculum field to be significantly expanded.[5] Further, changes in the nature of offerings were noted by the authors. Their 1973 survey revealed a more even distribution among several categories like elementary and secondary curriculum and curriculum development indicating that more attention is being given to various aspects of curriculum. It is noteworthy that 6% of the courses offered in 1973 were studies in "Curriculum Research and Evaluation;" whereas, in the original survey there were no such courses. Content offered in courses showed a significant increase in field-centered experiences and "problem solving." Results also indicated that a broader population is being reached by institutions having curriculum courses; the percentage of courses open to teachers, administrators, curriculum directors, and supervisors jumped from 29% in 1969 to 71% in 1973, and those open to college professors jumped from 1% to 39%. However, it appears that institutions confuse curriculum and method in identifying courses since 75 courses

---

[2]Donald G. Bateman, "An Investigation of the Circumstances and Conditions of the Undergraduate Course in Elementary School Curriculum in Teacher Education Programs in Selected Universities in the United States" (Doctoral dissertation, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, 1966).

[3]Lutian R. Wootton, "The Curriculum: Is the Concept Changing?" *Clearing House*, 42:143-145, November, 1967.

[4]Lutian R. Wootton and Robert W. Selwa, "Curriculum: A Changing Concept," *Educational Leadership*, 27:692-696, April, 1970.

[5]Lutian R. Wootton, John C. Reynolds, Jr., and Jerrell E. Lopp, "Curriculum Content and Experiences: A Comparative Survey," *Educational Leadership*, 31:431-434, February, 1974.

were reported by institutions to be curriculum courses, but only 9 of these were categorized by the researchers as curriculum. It is evident, therefore, that there is still confusion or lack of refinement in curriculum language.

RESEARCH

The journals most concerned with reviewing research in education are the *Review of Educational Research* and the *American Educational Research Journal.* A substantial number of the contributors to the summaries and articles devoted to curriculum have noted the paucity of curriculum research.

An interesting picture of the status of curriculum research is revealed in the 1960, the 1963, the 1966, and the 1969 June issues of the *Review*. The four issues contain twenty-seven chapters. Four of the twenty-seven contain discussions of the state of the field. Five fall under the general heading of forces influencing curriculum decisions. Two are devoted to curriculum components or design. Two chapters highlight teaching. Three review curriculum development processes. The conditions of curriculum theory and research are the topics of five. And four of the twenty-seven chapters are devoted to materials and media. One of the four issues contains five chapters, another ten chapters, and two six chapters, but this does not mean that topics treated in the ten-chapter issue were not treated more briefly somewhere in the other two. Many were. Nevertheless, this analysis of chapters gives some picture of the concerns of persons interested in curriculum research.

Goodlad concluded in 1960 that: "Curriculum theorizing to date is best described as abstract speculation; curriculum research as 'Dust-bowl' empiricism; and curriculum practice as rule-of-thumb guesswork. . . ."[6] To this Abramson added the following in 1966:

> The curriculum field has been very rich in statements of philosophy and principles, but, . . . is lacking in theoretical formulations which engender researchable hypotheses. Because of both the attempt to conduct research on the basis of the holistic view of curriculum and the derivative nature of its methodology, curriculum research has been

[6]John I. Goodlad, "Curriculum: The State of the Field," *Review of Educational Research*, 30:195, June, 1960.

> based predominantly on pupil testing, as has research in teaching and instruction.[7]

Abramson raises here the question of criteria for evaluation of curriculums and curriculum practices. Macdonald challenged the use of pupil learning as a criterion for curriculum evaluation. He suggested that once a curriculum is the output of a curriculum system, it would be more appropriate to use such criteria as degree of use of the curriculum made by teachers, teacher attitudes toward the curriculum, and so forth.[8] Goodlad summarized the 1969 issue. One of his conclusions was that "General theory and conceptualization in curriculum appear to have advanced very little during the last decade."[9]

In a provocative paper on curriculum research, Walker examined the following thesis:

> We in the field of curriculum have failed to conduct the empirical research needed to clarify the nature of the phenomena and problems we address. This failure is due in large part to misconceptions we have uncritically accepted of the nature and aims of empirical inquiry in a field concerned with practice, and, as a result of these misconceptions, our lack of faith in empirical inquiry as a means of dealing with our concerns.[10]

He defined as the central problem of curriculum that which should be taught, studied, or learned. Walker warned of traps involved in borrowing inappropriate rules for research patterns from the behavioral sciences, and he suggested instead that we should find more appropriate ways of getting factual information by observing and manipulating curriculum phenomena to help formulate and resolve curriculum problems.

It is apparent from reviews of research on curriculum that the research effort has not been making major contributions to the definition of curriculum as a field. The basic problems of scientific theorizing in curriculum have not been faced, or resolved, by

---

[7]David A. Abramson, "Curriculum Research and Evaluation," *Review of Educational Research*, 36:389, June, 1966.

[8]James B. Macdonald, "Curriculum Theory: Problems and A Prospectus" (a mimeographed paper presented at the meeting of Professors of Curriculum, Miami Beach, 1964).

[9]John I. Goodlad, "Curriculum: State of the Field," *Review of Educational Research*, 39:374, June, 1969.

[10]Decker Walker, "What Curriculum Research?" (A mimeographed paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, Illinois, April 4, 1972), p. 1.

curriculum researchers, too few of whom are specialists in curriculum theory.

COMMON DENOMINATORS

Despite the great diversity of opinion about curriculum as a field of study, as reflected by the discussion of the previous sections of this chapter, there do appear to be some common denominators to which all seriously thinking persons in curriculum, particularly theorists, must and do pay attention. As curriculum theorists identify and characterize both the common and uncommon denominators of curriculum as a field of study, they will be led to more sophisticated and to more sharply differentiated theories. In the following paragraphs, some basic and common dimensions of curriculum as a field of study are indicated with the caution that diverse opinions may exist within them.

Curriculum Design and Engineering

First among these common denominators are those that have been discussed in previous chapters under the titles of Curriculum Design and Curriculum Engineering. There is no need for us to review here the previous discussions about these components of the curriculum field. Few, if any, would deny that the problems and issues of curriculum design and the organization of culture content belong in the domain of curriculum, but conversely, many would disagree about specific dimensions of those problems and issues. Similarly, we can recognize curriculum engineering as an established component of the field of curriculum. Certainly, a curriculum must be planned if it is to exist. Once a curriculum exists people need to implement it. Avowedly, it should be revised continuously, and revision demands evaluation. Although diverse curriculum practices do reflect different curriculum positions, they nevertheless belong within the field of curriculum.

We may consider curriculum design and curriculum engineering to be the essential components of the field of curriculum, but they must be supported by research and theory building in order to qualify as a field of study. Even though there may be a paucity of both research and theory-building efforts

within the field of curriculum, substantial future progress as a field of study is dependent upon them.

Curriculum Experience

Our past experience in curriculum affairs is another facet of curriculum that students may share. Probably a substantial share of graduate study in the field of curriculum is a matter of reviewing the past experience by consulting works that have been written in both the immediate and remote past. Procedurally, a student of curriculum may wish to explore experience in curriculum matters from three perspectives: reports of curriculum programs in school systems, analysis of positions taken by curriculum writers, and attacks upon the field of curriculum as a whole in historical perspective. We have some examples from each of these in the literature. For example, the book entitled *Curriculum Improvement in Public School Systems* published by Hollis Caswell and associates in 1950 reported nine current curriculum programs.[11] A decade later, McNally, Passow, and associates published a sequel to Caswell's report.[12] They reported on curriculum practices in seven state, county, or district communities. Future scholars would provide increased clarity to the practical dimensions of curriculum design and engineering if more reporting of this type were done.

Various writers in curriculum have recorded and published their positions on curriculum matters. These do exist, and they are a matter of common record for students of the curriculum field. A weakness of the field is that these contrasting positions are not openly and vigorously debated. It appears as if curriculum scholars fear that they may hurt one another's feelings. We have not had a definitive work in which curriculum postures were frankly and openly discussed since the two-part Twenty-sixth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education under the chairmanship of Harold Rugg was published in 1927. Furthermore, researchers seldom focus upon critical and comparative analysis of organized curriculum postures. Altman's

[11] Hollis L. Caswell and associates, *Curriculum Improvement in Public School Systems*, (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1950).

[12] Harold J. McNally, A. Harry Passow, and associates, *Improving the Quality of Public School Programs* (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1960).

study[13] of positions on curriculum planning was unique in this respect. Seguel's analysis of the curriculum works of the McMurrys, John Dewey, Franklin Bobbitt, Harold Rugg, and Hollis Caswell is a very singular work.[14] Critical and comparative analysis of published works is a very rich and profitable area for concentration of research effort.

Another way in which our past experience is a common denominator to the field of curriculum is the development of the field in historical perspective. This dimension is reflected through the ebb and flow of postures taken by curriculum scholars, research trends, and vagaries in curriculum practices in schools. When it was the policy of the American Educational Research Association to publish an issue of the *Review of Educational Research* on curriculum once every three years, historical studies reflecting such attention to the past dimensions of the field were occasionally reviewed. For example, in the June of 1957 issue Beauchamp prepared a chapter entitled "Curriculum Organization and Development in Historical Perspective."[15] Similarly in the June of 1969 issue Bellack prepared a chapter entitled "History of Curriculum Thought and Practice."[16]

Two studies conducted by individuals serve as exemplars of needed research on the development of the field. One is the study by Phillips[17] in which he traced how the concept "curriculum" had been used since Bobbitt wrote the first definitive work on curriculum in 1918. The study by Seguel[18] was broader in scope as she reviewed the development of curriculum as a field during its formative years by using the work of individuals as illustrative of various periods or stages of development. A sequel to this carefully executed study is much needed, and there is a study covering the period between 1940 and 1973 currently being developed by Gregory Mullen at Northwestern University.

---

[13] *Op. cit.*

[14] Mary Louise Seguel, *The Curriculum Field: Its Formative Years* (New York: Teachers College Press, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1966).

[15] George A. Beauchamp, "Curriculum Organization and Development in Historical Perspective," *Review of Educational Research*, 27:239-261, June, 1957.

[16] Arno A. Bellack, "History of Curriculum Thought and Practice," *Review of Educational Research*, 39:283-292, June, 1969.

[17] Richard C. Phillips, "A Historical Study of the Concept Curriculum" (Doctoral dissertation, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, 1962).

[18] *Op. cit.*

Organized Fields of Knowledge

Certain organized fields of knowledge constitute another rough common denominator of the field of curriculum. Particularly identifiable are the so-called educational foundations, the parent disciplines to the culture content of school subjects, and the disciplines that are cognate to the study of curriculum.

Few students of the field of curriculum would deny the need to include the study of educational foundations as part of the field of curriculum. This is evidenced by the fact that most authors of textbooks on curriculum include chapters covering such subjects as the history of curriculum efforts, principles of learning, human growth and development, cultural and social information about schools including political forces, and tenets from the philosophy of education. These subjects have been treated as the foundations of education in general with scholars in each specific component of education, including curriculum, drawing from them information and authority for much of their work. The significance of foundational influences upon education is highlighted by positions occupied by people in professional education. Each foundational area has a parent in the conventional discipline — educational psychology has one in psychology, philosophy of education in philosophy, educational sociology in sociology, and so forth. But education is an applied discipline, and it is the job of the educational psychologist, the philosopher of education, and the sociologist to apply knowledge from their parent disciplines to education. The same is true for students of the field of curriculum. They must study the import of knowledge from related disciplines for the characteristics and functions of curriculum.

The parent disciplines of the culture content to be used as school subject matter are another common denominator for the field of curriculum. The organized fields of knowledge are constantly changing their configurations, and where appropriate, school curricula should reflect such changes. For example, if historians through their research efforts come up with valid and reliable reinterpretations of American colonial history, those interpretations should be reflected in social studies programs for both elementary and secondary schools. Dozens of similar specified content illustrations could be given from other

disciplines. Additionally, new rationales for the organization of school subjects are proposed within the parent disciplines, and these rationales must be prerequisite information for selecting and organizing culture content for a school's curriculum. All of which points to the organized disciplines as a necessary and common dimension of curriculum as a field of study, and the focal point for such knowledge in curriculum design.

A third common denominator for students of curriculum consists of those disciplines that are cognate to the field of curriculum, particularly that portion having to do with curriculum engineering. I contend that too many of those who write about curriculum theory ignore both the substance of curriculum engineering and the source disciplines for leadership behaviors in the processes of curriculum engineering. The exploration of philosophy of science, logic, organizational behavior theory, political science, and sociology are vivid examples of studies that are highly desirable, if not essential, for anyone who wishes to become a student of the complete field of curriculum. The study of learning theory and epistemology are two additional fields of study that are useful to the curriculum specialist but more appropriately related to curriculum design. To these may be added statistics, research design, and computer technology as source disciplines to the research and theory-building component of the curriculum field. It is from the cognate disciplines that the curriculum theorist searches for paradigms for his own theory-building activities. The ability to make such translations is one of the curriculum specialist's more important skills.

Thus, curriculum design and curriculum engineering are fundamental components of the field of curriculum in the sense that these components are what the field is all about. When you add research on design, engineering, and theory development to them, you will have circumscribed the dimensions of the field of study. However, the basic dimensions of the field are not enough to adequately describe all of what actually are the common denominators of the field. Curriculum is an applied discipline, at least an applied area of study. As such, it not only develops its own history in the form of experience with design, engineering, research, and theory; it furthers its development through the

constant reapplication of knowledge from foundational areas and related disciplines.

SUMMARY AND A POINT OF VIEW

When interpretations of the field of curriculum are guided principally by the search for answers to questions about what shall be taught in a school, it is easier to identify commonality among those interpretations than when interpretations of the field of curriculum are guided by search for answers to questions about what shall be taught in schools *and* to questions about how to teach whatever is to be taught. When theories and research are inadequate to explain and support those interpretations, the state of the field appears chaotic and ill-defined. The discussion presented in this chapter supports these generalizations.

Careful scrutiny of literature does indicate that there is substantial agreement that certain large areas belong under the umbrella of the curriculum field. In this chapter, I have identified curriculum content and design, curriculum engineering, research and theory development, and the study of related disciplines as common dimensions of curriculum as a field of study. Despite nominal agreement about the inclusion of these large areas within the field, writers show considerable disparity in meanings associated with fundamental concepts in curriculum. Chief among these are definitions of a curriculum, conceived uses for a curriculum, and the processes of curriculum development.

The work of curriculum theorists is an encouraging phenomenon. Theorists have the opportunity to capitalize upon the common and uncommon denominators of the present status of the curriculum field by using them as springboards for better and unique theories. In the process, curriculum as a field of study should become more clarified.

My point of view on the substance of curriculum as a field of study already has been exhibited in the summaries of the chapters on curriculum design and curriculum engineering and in the section of this chapter dealing with common denominators of the field. For me, the essential ingredients of the curriculum field are nested in deliberations about curriculum content and design and

about the processes of curriculum engineering. For curriculum to be recognized as a field of scholarship, research and theory development covering the broad spectra of design and engineering are essential. The primary assumption behind these statements is that the question of what shall be taught in a school is the singular problem of the field of curriculum. Questions about how to teach belong in the broad field of education, but they should be included in the field of instruction.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Note: Most of the suggested readings at the end of Chapter 7 also are relevant here.

Altman, Burton E. "An Identification and Classification of Selected Characteristics of Cooperative Curriculum Planning Positions from 1918 to 1965." Doctoral dissertation, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, 1965.

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, NEA. *Research for Curriculum Improvement.* 1957 Yearbook. Washington, D.C.: the Association, 1957.

Bateman, Donald G. "An Investigation of the Circumstances and Conditions of the Undergraduate Course in Elementary School Curriculum in Teacher Education Programs in Selected Universities in the United States." Doctoral dissertation, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, 1966.

Eisner, Elliot W. (ed.). *Confronting Curriculum Reform.* Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971.

Huebner, Dwayne (ed.). *A Reassessment of the Curriculum.* New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1964.

Kerr, J. F. *The Problem of Curriculum Reform.* Leicester, England: Leicester University Press, 1967.

Kliebard, Herbert. "The Curriculum Field in Retrospect," *Technology and the Curriculum.* P. W. F. Witt (ed.). New York: Teachers College Press, 1968. pp. 69-84.

McClure, Robert M. (ed.). *The Curriculum: Restrospect and Prospect.* The Seventieth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971.

Parker, J. Cecil and Louis J. Rubin. *Process as Content: Curriculum Design and the Application of Knowledge.* Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1966.

Phillips, Richard Claybourne. "An Historical Study of the Concept Curriculum." Doctoral dissertation, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, 1962.

Robinson, Helen R. (ed.). *Precedents and Promise in the Curriculum Field.* New York: Teachers College Press, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1966.

Seguel, Mary Louise. *The Curriculum Field: Its Formative Years.* New York: Teachers College Press, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1966.

Short, Edmund C. (ed.). "A Search for Valid Content for Curriculum Courses," *Educational Comment/1970*. Toledo, Ohio: College of Education, University of Toledo, 1970.

Short, Edmund C. "Knowledge Production and Utilization in Curriculum: A Special Case of the General Phenomenon," *Review of Educational Research*, 43:287-302, Summer, 1973.

Smith, B. Othanel and Robert H. Ennis. *Language and Concepts in Education*. Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1961.

Tyler, Louise L. *A Selected Guide to Curriculum Literature: An Annotated Bibliography*. Washington: National Educational Association, 1970.

Venable, Tom C. *Philosophical Foundations of the Curriculum*. Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1967.

Wootton, Lutian R. "The Curriculum: Is the Concept Changing," *Clearing House*, 42:143-145, November, 1967.

Wootton, Lutian R. and Robert W. Selwa. "Curriculum: A Changing Concept," *Educational Leadership*, 27:692-696, April, 1970.