
Philosophy as a Basis for Curriculum Decisions

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FOCUSING QUESTIONS

1. How does philosophy guide the organization and implementation of curriculum?
2. What are the sources of knowledge that shape a person's philosophy of curriculum?
3. What are the sources of knowledge that shape your philosophical view of curriculum?
4. How do the aims, means, and ends of education differ?
5. What is the major philosophical issue that must be determined before we can define a philosophy of curriculum?
6. What are the four major educational philosophies that have influenced curriculum in the United States?
7. What is your philosophy of curriculum?

Philosophic issues always have had and still do have an impact on schools and society. Contemporary society and its schools are changing fundamentally and rapidly, much more so than in the past. There is a special urgency that dictates continuous appraisal and reappraisal of the role of schools, and calls for a philosophy of education. Without philosophy, educators are directionless in the whats and hows of organizing and implementing what we are trying to achieve. In short, our philosophy of education influences, and to a large extent determines, our educational decisions, choices, and alternatives.

PHILOSOPHY AND CURRICULUM

Philosophy provides educators, especially curriculum specialists, with a framework for organizing schools and classrooms. It helps them answer questions about what the school's purpose is, what subjects are of value, how students learn, and what methods and materials to use. Philosophy pro-

vides them with a framework for broad issues and tasks, such as determining the goals of education, subject content and its organization, the process of teaching and learning, and, in general, what experiences and activities to stress in schools and classrooms. It also provides educators with a basis for making such decisions as what workbooks, textbooks, or other cognitive and noncognitive activities to utilize and how to utilize them, what and how much homework to assign, how to test students and how to use the test results, and what courses or subject matter to emphasize.

The importance of philosophy in determining curriculum decisions is expressed well by the classic statement of Thomas Hopkins (1941): "Philosophy has entered into every important decision that has ever been made about curriculum and teaching in the past and will continue to be the basis of every important decision in the future. . . . There is rarely a moment in a school day when a teacher is not confronted with occasions where philosophy is a vital part of action."

Hopkins' statement reminds us of how important philosophy is to all aspects of curriculum decisions, whether it operates overtly or covertly. Indeed, almost all elements of curriculum are based on philosophy. As John Goodlad (1979b) points out, philosophy is the beginning point in curriculum decision making and is the basis for all subsequent decisions regarding curriculum. Philosophy becomes the criterion for determining the aims, means, and ends of curriculum. The aims are statements of value, based on philosophical beliefs; the means represent processes and methods, which reflect philosophical choices; and the ends connote the facts, concepts, and principles of the knowledge or behavior learned—what is felt to be important to learning.

Smith, Stanley, and Shores (1957) also put great emphasis on the role of philosophy in developing curriculum, asserting it is essential when formulating and justifying educational purposes, selecting and organizing knowledge, formulating basic procedures and activities, and dealing with verbal traps (what we see versus what is read). Curriculum theorists, they point out, often fail to recognize both how important philosophy is to developing curriculum and how it influences aspects of curriculum.

Philosophy and the Curriculum Specialist

The philosophy of curriculum specialists reflects their life experiences, common sense, social and economic background, education, and general beliefs about people. An individual's philosophy evolves and continues to evolve as long as there is personal growth, development, and learning from experience. Philosophy is a description, explanation, and evaluation of the world as seen from personal perspective, or through what some social scientists call "social lenses."

Curriculum specialists can turn to many sources of knowledge, but no matter how many sources they draw on or how many authorities they listen to, their decisions are shaped by all the experiences that have affected them and the social groups with which they identify. These decisions are based on values, attitudes, and beliefs that they have developed, involving their knowledge and interpretation of causes, events, and their consequences. Philosophy determines principles for guiding action.

No one can be totally objective in a cultural or social setting, but curriculum specialists can broaden their base of knowledge and experiences by trying to understand other people's sense of values and by analyzing problems from various perspectives. They can also try to modify their own critical analyses and points of view by learning from their experiences and those of others. Curriculum specialists who are unwilling to modify their points of view, or compromise philosophical positions when school officials or their colleagues espouse another philosophy, are at risk of causing conflict and disrupting the school. Ronald Doll (1986) puts it this way: "Conflict among curriculum planners occurs when persons . . . hold positions along a continuum of [different] beliefs and . . . persuasions." The conflict may become so intense that "curriculum study grinds to a halt." Most of the time, the differences can be reconciled "temporarily in deference to the demands of a temporary, immediate task." However, Doll further explains that "teachers and administrators who are clearly divided in philosophy can seldom work together in close proximity for long periods of time."

The more mature and understanding and the less personally threatened and ego-involved individuals are, the more capable they are of reexamining or modifying their philosophy, or at least of being willing to appreciate other points of view. It is important for curriculum specialists to regard their attitudes and beliefs as tentative—as subject to reexamination whenever facts or trends challenge them. Equally dangerous for curriculum specialists is the opposite—indecision or lack of any philosophy, which can be reflected in attempts to avoid commitment to a set of values. A measure of positive conviction is essential to prudent action. Having a personal philosophy that is tentative or subject to modification does not lead to lack of conviction or disorganized behavior. Curriculum specialists can arrive at their conclusions on the best evidence available, and they then can change when better evidence surfaces.

Philosophy as a Curriculum Source

The function of philosophy can be conceived as either the base for the starting point in curricu-

lum development or an interdependent function of other functions in curriculum development. John Dewey (1916) represents the first school of thought by contending that “philosophy may . . . be defined as the general theory of education,” and that “the business of philosophy is to provide [the framework] for the aims and methods” of schools. For Dewey, philosophy provides a generalized meaning to our lives and a way of thinking, “an explicit formulation of the . . . mental and moral attitudes in respect to the difficulties of contemporary social life.” Philosophy is not only a starting point for schools; it is also crucial for all curriculum activities. For as Dewey adds, “Education is the laboratory in which philosophic distinctions become concrete and are tested.”

Highly influenced by Dewey, Ralph Tyler’s (1949) framework of curriculum includes philosophy as only one of five criteria commonly used for selecting educational purposes. The relationship between philosophy and the other criteria—studies of learners, studies of contemporary life, suggestions from subject specialists, and the psychology of learning—is the basis for determining the school’s purposes. Although philosophy is not the starting point in Tyler’s curriculum, but rather interacts on an equal basis with the other criteria, he does seem to place more importance on philosophy for developing educational purposes. Tyler (1949) writes, “The educational and social philosophy to which the school is committed can serve as the first screen for developing the social program.” He concludes that “philosophy attempts to define the nature of the good life and a good society,” and that the “educational philosophies in a democratic society are likely to emphasize strongly democratic values in schools.”

There can be no serious discussion about philosophy until we embrace the question of what is education. When we agree on what education is, we can ask what the school’s purpose is. We can then pursue philosophy, aims, and goals of curriculum. According to Goodlad (1979b), the school’s first responsibility is to the social order, what he calls the “nation-state,” but in our society the sense of individual growth and potential is paramount. This duality—society versus the individual—has been a major philosophical issue in Western society for centuries and was a very important issue

in Dewey’s works. As Dewey (1916) claimed, we not only wish “to make [good] citizens and workers” but also ultimately want “to make human beings who will live life to the fullest.”

The compromise of the duality between national allegiance and individual fulfillment is a noble aim that should guide all curriculum specialists—from the means to the ends. When many individuals grow and prosper, then society flourishes. The original question set forth by Goodlad can be answered: Education is growth and the focal point for the individual as well as society; it is a never-ending process of life, and the more refined the guiding philosophy the better the quality of the educational process.

In considering the influence of philosophic thought on curriculum, several classification schemes are possible; therefore, no superiority is claimed for the categories used in the tables here. The clusters of ideas are those that often evolve openly or unwittingly during curriculum planning.

Four major educational philosophies have influenced curriculum in the United States: Perennialism, Essentialism, Progressivism, and Reconstructionism. Table 1.1 provides an overview of these education philosophies and how they affect curriculum, instruction, and teaching. Teachers and administrators should compare the content of the categories with their own philosophical “lens” in terms of how they view curriculum and how other views of curriculum and related instructional and teaching issues may disagree.

Another way of interpreting philosophy and its effect on curriculum is to analyze philosophy in terms of polarity. The danger of this method is to simplify it in terms of a dichotomy, not to recognize that there are overlaps and shifts. Table 1.2 illustrates philosophy in terms of traditional and contemporary categories. The traditional philosophy, as shown, tends to overlap with Perennialism and Essentialism. Contemporary philosophy tends to coincide with Progressivism and Reconstructionism.

Table 1.2 shows that traditional philosophy focuses on the past, emphasizes fixed and absolute values, and glorifies our cultural heritage. Contemporary philosophy emphasizes the present and future and views events as changeable and relative; for the latter, nothing can be preserved

TABLE 1.1 Overview of Educational Philosophies

	<i>Philosophical Base</i>	<i>Instructional Objective</i>	<i>Knowledge</i>	<i>Role of Teacher</i>	<i>Curriculum Focus</i>	<i>Related Curriculum Trends</i>
<i>Perennialism</i>	Realism	To educate the rational person; to cultivate the intellect	Focus on past and permanent studies; mastery of facts and timeless knowledge	Teacher helps students think rationally; based on Socratic method and oral exposition; explicit teaching of traditional values	Classical subjects; literary analysis; constant curriculum	Great books; <i>Paideia</i> proposal
<i>Essentialism</i>	Idealism, Realism	To promote the intellectual growth of the individual; to educate the competent person	Essential skills and academic subjects; mastery of concepts and principles of subject matter	Teacher is authority in his or her field; explicit teaching of traditional values	Essential skills (three Rs) and essential subjects (English, arithmetic, science, history, and foreign language)	Back to basics; excellence in education
<i>Progressivism</i>	Pragmatism	To promote democratic, social living	Knowledge leads to growth and development; a living-learning process; focus on active and interesting learning	Teacher is a guide for problem solving and scientific inquiry	Based on students' interests; involves the application of human problems and affairs; interdisciplinary subject matter; activities and projects	Relevant curriculum; humanistic education; alternative and free schooling
<i>Reconstructionism</i>	Pragmatism	To improve and reconstruct society; education for change and social reform	Skills and subjects needed to identify and ameliorate problems of society; learning is active and concerned with contemporary and future society	Teacher serves as an agent of change and reform; acts as a project director and research leader; helps students become aware of problems confronting humankind	Emphasis on social sciences and social research methods; examination of social, economic, and political problems; focus on present and future trends as well as national and international issues	Equality of education; cultural pluralism; international education; futurism

TABLE 1.2 Overview of Traditional and Contemporary Philosophies

<i>Philosophical Consideration</i>	<i>Traditional Philosophy</i>	<i>Contemporary Philosophy</i>
Educational philosophy	Perennialism, Essentialism	Progressivism, Reconstructionism
Direction in time	Superiority of past; education for preserving past	Education is growth; reconstruction of present experiences; changing society; concern for future and shaping it
Values	Fixed, absolute, objective, and/or universal	Changeable, subjective, and/or relative
Educational process	Education is viewed as instruction; mind is disciplined and filled with knowledge	Education is viewed as creative self-learning; active process in which learner reconstructs knowledge
Intellectual emphasis	To train or discipline the mind; emphasis on subject matter	To engage in problem-solving activities and social activities; emphasis on student interests and needs
Worth of subject matter	Subject matter for its own importance; certain subjects are better than others for training the mind	Subject matter is a medium for teaching skills, attitudes, and intellectual processes; all subjects have similar value for problem-solving activities
Curriculum content	Curriculum is composed of three Rs, as well as liberal studies or essential academic subjects	Curriculum is composed of three Rs, as well as skills and concepts in arts, sciences, and vocational studies
Learning	Emphasis on cognitive learning; learning is acquiring knowledge and/or competency in disciplines	Emphasis on whole child; learning is giving meaning to experiences and/or active involvement in reform
Grouping	Homogeneous grouping and teaching of students by ability	Heterogeneous grouping and integration of students by ability (as well as race, sex, and class)
Teacher	Teacher is an authority on subject matter; teacher plans activities; teacher supplies knowledge to student; teacher talks, dominates lesson; Socratic method	Teacher is a guide for inquiry and change agent; teacher and students plan activities; students learn on their own independent of the teacher; teacher-student dialogue; student initiates much of the discussion and activities
Social roles	Education involves direction, control, and restraint; group (family, community, church, nation, etc.) always comes first	Education involves individual expression; individual comes first
Citizenship	Cognitive and moral development leads to good citizenship	Personal and social development leads to good citizenship
Freedom and democracy	Acceptance of one's fate, conformity, and compliance with authority; knowledge and discipline prepare students for freedom	Emphasis on creativeness, nonconformity, and self-actualization; direct experiences in democratic living and political/social action prepare students for freedom
Excellence vs. equality	Excellence in education; education as far as human potential permits; academic rewards and jobs based on merit	Equality of education; education which permits more than one chance and more than an equal chance to disadvantaged groups; education and employment sectors consider unequal abilities of individuals and put some restraints on achieving individuals so that different outcomes and group scores, if any, are reduced
Society	Emphasis on group values; acceptance of norms of and roles in society; cooperative and conforming behavior; importance of society; individual restricted by custom and tradition of society	Emphasis on individual growth and development; belief in individual with ability to modify, even reconstruct, the social environment; independent and self-realizing, fully functioning behavior; importance of person; full opportunity to develop one's own potential

forever, for despite any attempt, change is inevitable. The traditionalists wish to train the mind, emphasize subject matter, and fill the learner with knowledge and information. Those who ascribe to contemporary philosophies are more concerned with problem solving and emphasize student interests and needs. Whereas subject matter is considered important for its own sake, according to traditionalists, certain subjects are more important than others. For contemporary educators, subject matter is considered a medium for teaching skills and attitudes, and most subjects have similar value. According to the traditionalists, the teacher is an authority in subject matter, who dominates the lesson with explanations and lectures. For the contemporary proponent, the teacher is a guide for learning, as well as an agent for change; students and teachers often are engaged in dialogue.

In terms of social issues and society, traditionalists view education as a means of providing direction, control, and restraint, while their counterparts focus on individual expression and freedom from authority. Citizenship is linked to cognitive development for the traditional educator, and it is linked to moral and social development for the contemporary educator. Knowledge and the disciplines prepare students for freedom, according to the traditional view, but it is direct experience in democratic living and political/social action which prepares students for freedom, according to the contemporary ideal. Traditionalists believe in excellence, and contemporary educators favor equality. The traditional view of education maintains that group values come first, where cooperative and conforming behaviors are important for the good of society. Contemporary educators assert that what is good for the individual should come first, and they believe in the individual modifying and perhaps reconstructing society.

The Curriculum Specialist at Work

Philosophy gives meaning to our decisions and actions. In the absence of a philosophy, educators are vulnerable to externally imposed prescriptions, to fads and frills, to authoritarian schemes, and to other "isms." Dewey (1916) was so convinced of the importance of philosophy that he viewed it as the all-encompassing aspect of the educational

process—as necessary for “forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellow man.” If this conclusion is accepted, it becomes evident that many aspects of a curriculum, if not most of the educational processes in school, are developed from a philosophy. Even if it is believed that Dewey’s point is an overstatement, the pervasiveness of philosophy in determining views of reality, the values and knowledge that are worthwhile, and the decisions to be made about education and curriculum should still be recognized.

Very few schools adopt a single philosophy; in practice, most schools combine various philosophies. Moreover, the author’s position is that no single philosophy, old or new, should serve as the exclusive guide for making decisions about schools or about the curriculum. All philosophical groups want the same things of education—that is, they wish to improve the educational process, to enhance the achievement of the learner, to produce better and more productive citizens, and to improve society. Because of their different views of reality, values, and knowledge, however, they find it difficult to agree on how to achieve these ends.

What we need to do, as curricularists, is to search for the middle ground, a highly elusive and abstract concept, in which there is no extreme emphasis on subject matter or student, cognitive development or sociopsychological development, excellence or equality. What we need is a prudent school philosophy, one that is politically and economically feasible, that serves the needs of students and society. Implicit in this view of education is that too much emphasis on any one philosophy may do harm and cause conflict. How much one philosophy is emphasized, under the guise of reform (or for whatever reason), is critical because no one society can give itself over to extreme “isms” or political views and still remain a democracy. The kind of society that evolves is in part reflected in the education system, which is influenced by the philosophy that is eventually defined and developed.

CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, curriculum specialists must understand that they are continuously faced with

curriculum decisions, and that philosophy is important in determining these decisions. Unfortunately, few school people test their notions of curriculum against their school's statement of philosophy. According to Brandt and Tyler (1983), it is not uncommon to find teachers and administrators developing elaborate lists of behavioral objectives with little or no consideration to the overall philosophy of the school. Curriculum workers need to provide assistance in developing and designing school practices that coincide with the philosophy of the school and community. Teaching, learning, and curriculum are all interwoven in school practices and should reflect a school's and a community's philosophy.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which philosophical approach reflects your beliefs about (a) the school's purpose, (b) what subjects are of value, (c) how students learn, and (d) the process of teaching and learning?
2. What curriculum focus would the perennialists and essentialists recommend for our increasingly diverse school-age population?
3. What curriculum would the progressivists and reconstructionists select for a multicultural student population?
4. Should curriculum workers adopt a single philosophy to guide their practices? Why? Why not?
5. Which philosophy is most relevant to contemporary education? Why?