

Stepp's Theory of Curriculum

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## **Abstract**

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This paper explores multiple theories and theorists in order to provide the framework for the development of my own personal theory of curriculum.

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# Stepp's Theory of Curriculum

## Introduction

The challenge of this paper is to review and synthesize the multiple curriculum theories and theorists explored in the Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman (1995) text, *Understanding Curriculum*, its source documents, and other related texts in order to investigate my own opinions and viewpoints for the development a personal theory of curriculum. With little previous exposure to curriculum theory or development, this task was daunting. My first undertaking was to understand the nature of curriculum theory.

McCutcheon (1982) defined curriculum theory as “an integrated cluster of sets of analyses, interpretations, and understandings of curricular phenomena” (p. 19) and how each work together to form a strong value base from a variety of disciplines. The purpose of curriculum theory is to “guide the work of teachers, researchers, curriculum developers, policy makers, administrators and other educators” (p. 20). Theory is the base upon which we build; it is the map for improving curriculum through heightened awareness and conception of new ideas while anticipating the consequences.

In considering multiple theories to help me evaluate my beliefs about curriculum in education today, Eisner and Vallance's (1974) defining categories of curriculum conceptions helped me determine my focus. Their cognitive process orientation seeks to develop cognitive skills that are to be used in a wide range of problems yet endure longer than the content knowledge of a particular learning experience. The technological orientation guides one to a particular purpose while the social reconstructionist orientation believes that schooling is for the purpose of social change. The academic

rationalist orientation seeks a distinctive discipline structure. The final orientation is self-actualization.

I found that my educational views most closely related to the idea of self-actualization. Within this orientation, the purpose of schooling is “to become a means of personal fulfillment, to provide a context in which individuals discover and develop their own personal identities...a pervasive and enriching experience with implications for many dimensions for personal development” (Eisner and Vallance, 1974, p. 105). While this humanistic viewpoint forms the foundation of my curricular views, I also believe that education serves other purposes while still promoting the idea of self-actualization. The need to obtain an occupation is a worthwhile educational goal promoting the self-actualization of the individual. I also believe that an individual must actualize him or herself before he or she is fully capable of making valuable contributions toward social change. Change must first come from within oneself.

### **Literature in Support of My Personal Curriculum Beliefs**

#### **Relationships in the Classroom**

Taubman (1990) wrote that teachers “come to be within a complex dynamic. Their initial sense of themselves, given to them by another, is already a fiction” (p. 123). Whether considered consciously or unconsciously, new teachers model themselves after their role models in teacher education programs. When they enter their own classrooms, they may struggle to find their own identity. While their roots of identity are not expected to change, teachers in a particular classroom must evaluate their identities in relation to the district, the school, the administration, their colleagues, the parents, and

most importantly, the students. Each new class requires a certain level of adaptation not to disguise identity, but to enhance it to meet the needs of each student as well as the collective classroom.

Such adaptation is essential. Huebner (1975) explained it this way: “The student is not viewed as an object, an *it*; but as a fellow human being, another subject, a *thou*, who is to be lived with in the fullness of the present moment” (p. 227). Smith (1991) discussed the issue of identity and relationship and noted that teachers must be able to mediate differences within the classroom.

McLaren (1989) furthered the idea in this statement:

A student’s voice is not a reflection of the work as much as it is a constitutive force that both mediates and shapes reality within historically constructed practices and relationships of power...Teacher voice reflects the values, ideologies, and structuring principles that teachers use to understand and mediate the histories, cultures, and subjectivities of their students. (p. 130)

In such a classroom, there still must be a strong, organized foundational structure that establishes the learning objectives and establishes the opportunity for measuring the outcomes. This practice can still allow the individual teacher freedom and flexibility in assessing the individuality of his or her specific classroom and in implementing the delivery of the structured curriculum.

In reflecting upon teaching in the classroom, Greene (1995) encouraged teachers to reach beyond what is custom to “touch the consciousness of those we teach” (p. 56). To do so, one must acknowledge that the “quest involves me as woman, as teacher, as

citizen, as New Yorker, as art-lover, as activist, as philosopher, as white middle-class American” (p. 1). In essence, teachers are many different people and each separate experience forms our autobiographies and how we make adaptations for the classroom. Referencing Greene’s work, Pinar (1995) posits that “the task is for the teacher to be a verb, not a noun, and to express such intensity of perception and feeling to her or his students” (p. 605). In order to be the “verb” in the classroom, I believe that the teacher must become more than just the deliverer of content. A teacher must reveal his or her own autobiographical experience within the context of the student learning opportunities in the classroom. The teacher is responsible for creating the synergy of the classroom.

### **Methods in the Classroom**

Pinar (1975) denoted the work of Ralph Tyler as “traditional curriculum writing” (p. xi) representing the early practice of the contemporary curriculum field. His work was intended to directly guide teachers in the classroom. According to Hewitt (2006), Tyler built his work upon that of Friedrich Herbart. The Herbartian method of curriculum included steps of preparation, presentation, association, generalization, and application in order to cultivate unity in the curriculum. His method involved the separation of “how” and “what” was to be taught and first encouraged the development of a lesson plan. In his own work, Herbart (1895) considered human beings to be innately good and education was for the purpose of promoting character development and bringing out the good in each student.

Tyler’s Rationale built upon this structure by adding the development of objectives and evaluation. Tyler developed his rationale as a result of his work as an evaluator in the 1930s Eight-Year Study of the Progressive Education Association. The

steps included: stating purposes, identifying experiences, organizing experiences, and evaluating experiences. The steps were easy to implement and established a way to identify relationships between the planned objectives and the desired outcomes (Hewitt, 2006). Tyler's work was later expanded upon by Hilda Taba who noted the importance of diagnosing needs before formulating objectives (Hewitt, 2006).

Just as McCutcheon noted the purpose of curriculum theory was to guide teachers and others involved in the education process, I began to side with the traditionalist work because it provided a direct connection to the implementation of a structured curriculum in the actual classroom. Cherryholmes (1988) summed up Tyler's principles by stating that the rationale "promised order, organization, rationality, error correction, political neutrality, expertise, and progress" (p. 26).

In opposition to Tyler's traditional work, Travers (1983) suggested that the work evolved into a rationale for test development in which the test determined the curriculum. Also in opposition, Carson (1989) noted that curriculum should be viewed as "an opening up of possibilities that enable learning rather than as the management of expected outcomes" (p. 55). Goodman (1988) implied that prepackaged curricula disenfranchised teachers.

Eisner (2002) also questioned the feasibility of a "one-size-fits-all curriculum" in a nation as diverse as ours. He was skeptical of Tyler's Rationale (Pinar, 1995). He noted that there is no single version of the social studies discipline, science, or even mathematics. Yet, he also questioned the opportunity for comparable assessment and accountability when diversity in the curriculum is implemented. He noted that:

...the scope of teachers' freedom regarding what skills are to be taught, when, in what order, and how is far wider than what the most highly structured programs provide for. Typically, the teacher will have a general guide of topics in a subject field, a sequence among topics, a general set of aims, textbooks, and other instructional resources. With these materials and within the constraints set by time, school culture, and the characteristics of students, the teacher builds an educational program. (p. 126)

Huebner (1975) noted that Tyler's Rationale was not enough; it was necessary to also consider the ethical and aesthetic value of the classroom experience. Just as Tanner (1971) recognized that the value of the curriculum was more than the sum of its components, I would argue that a structured curriculum provides a basic framework to build upon while giving a teacher the freedom to adapt the structure to meet the needs of the students. Later, Bowers (1984) defined a process that teachers could use to adapt a prepackaged curriculum:

1. Does the content of the curriculum reflect what the student already experiences as taken for granted? (p. 57)
2. Is the content of the curriculum represented as reified reality? (p. 60)
3. What are the areas of audible silence in the curriculum? (p. 63)
4. Is the curriculum characterized by a limited or complex language code? (p. 65)
5. Does the socialization involve using the legitimation process to make students feel powerless? (p. 66)

6. Does the curriculum contribute to social stratification and inequalities of opportunities? (p. 68)
7. What is the influence of the purposive-rational system of thought on the liberalizing potential of school knowledge? (p. 69)

In implementing a structured curriculum, the teacher must understand the autobiographical experiences of his or her students in order to adapt the delivery of the content to meet the students' learning styles. Shulman (1987) defined pedagogical content knowledge as the teacher's capacity "to transform the content knowledge he or she possesses into form that are pedagogically powerful yet adaptive to the variations in ability and background presented by the students" (p. 15).

### **A Look at Individual Opportunity**

"Schooling needs to be 'known' in the Old Testament biblical sense: by direct, intimate contact" (Eisner, 1991, p. 11). While Eisner's statement might be a bit unusual, it generally reflects my philosophy on the relationships between teachers and students. In order for learning to occur, the teacher must work to establish a learning relationship with each student. Jackson (1993) suggests that teachers are morally obligated to treat students in a respectable, kind, considerate, and understanding manner. While we know that such treatment does have lasting effects and produces positive outcomes, it should be done simply because, as human beings, "students *deserve* to be treated that way" (p. 292). Jackson also urges teachers to explore their level of potency within this moral obligation. By treating each student in a truly individual and understanding manner, perhaps we can break through the prevailing hegemony within our schools.

In establishing this relationship, it is essential for teachers to pay attention in his or her classroom and any related activities outside the classroom. He or she must listen and observe to identify factors affecting the students' abilities to participate in the learning experiences. What outside factors might affect student performance? Does the student have a place to sleep and dinner on the table? Are there any classroom factors that are affecting student performance? It is immensely important for the teacher to understand the hurdles some students need to overcome in order to learn. Some students might be harder to "know" than others, but the end result will be worth the struggle.

The traditional theorists seem to agree that individuality is important in the educational experience. Bobbit (1918) discussed curriculum as a full range of in- and out-of-school experiences that concerned the "unfoldment" (p. 43) of the abilities of the individual. Pinar et al. (1995) referenced Schwab's concern about the intimacy and immediacy of teaching: "Schwab's attention was captured, not by a classroom in the abstract, but to *this* particular classroom, a careful examination of the characteristics of the students he taught *this* semester, and always a concern for the here-and-now of the next class, in *this* course, in *this program*" (p. 197). Goodman (1992) recognized the importance of promoting within the community a moral agenda in which each student's individuality, self-confidence, and evidence of participation in their own education was held in high esteem. Egan (1990) had a bit more romantic view in that he expressed "...a delight in the exotic, emphasis on individualism, revolt against the conventional...intense inquiry about the self..." (p. 1).

Failure to see the individual is a shortcoming of our educational systems. Greene (1995) explains:

The vision that sees things big brings us in close contact with details and with particularities that cannot be reduced to statistics or even to the measurable. There are...bulletin boards crammed with notices... children's drawings...an outspoken poem. The vision that sees things small looks at schooling through the lenses of a system...it uses the lenses of benevolent policy making, with the underlying conviction that changes in schools can bring about progressive social change...preoccupied with test scores, 'time on task,' management procedures, ethnic and racial percentages, and accountability measures, while it screens out the faces of individuals, of actual living persons. (pp. 10 -11)

While claiming that our "melting pot" society has expected citizens to give up their unique identities, McLaren (1993) reminds us that ethnicity should not be considered as anything "other than white" (p. 138). White students should also be encouraged to explore their individual ethnicities. Scott (1991) challenged teachers to allow students to explore their own identities from a historical perspective while encouraging students to think about differences and exhibit the respect of multiple viewpoints within the classroom.

In cooperation with developing the individual autobiographies of the students, it is necessary to shift the learning experience from that of the teacher to that of the student. In their book *The Learner-Centered Curriculum*, Cullen, Harris and Hill (2012) assert that student-centered learning allows the student to build the skills necessary for the twenty-first century workforce. I believe that such skills also promote the individual self-actualization of the student. In a student-centered learning environment, students will

learn to implement critical thinking skills, creativity, inquiry skills, experiential learning, and problem-solving abilities in all aspects of their work as well as their daily lives.

To build this type of learning environment, Cullen, Harris and Hill state that educators must recognize the personal nature of learning. The learner must be presented with multiple perspectives and gain awareness “of their own frame of reference and then become aware of the frames of reference that others employ. They gain perspective and deepen their understanding” (p. 55). In order to facilitate this deeper understanding, rigor in the classroom is essential. “Rigor is what creates richness...rigor is less about being strict or severe and more about being persistent and thorough in examining one’s understanding” (p. 56). Rigor provides the opportunity for integrative learning that focuses on problem-solving rather than discipline content.

### **Education and Society**

Education is an essential component of society. Stanley (1992) notes that one’s societal class position is directly related to his or her level of education. Lower class children typically need more educational support, but fail to receive it. He questions whether or not “class structure is more a natural reflection of human abilities or the artifact of unequal economic, cultural and political power” (pp. 204-205). Bateman (1974) takes this discussion a bit further by pointing out that a primary theme in our society is domination: “domination of the poor by the rich, Blacks, browns, reds, and yellows by whites, women by men, students by teachers...it is all related in obvious and subtle ways” (pp. 58-59). As a result, he believes that education is guided by politics and operated by those in power and forces others into their “preassigned places” (p. 60). Such text requires us to consider and question the hegemony seemingly controlling our

schools. In many instances, the affluent white community comprises the decision-makers and, in many cases, the teachers responsible for the delivery of the content. A teacher-centered learning model promotes the status quo and the hegemony within the system. A student-centered learning environment challenges the dominant culture.

Eisner (1991) considers education to be an opportunity to escape this hegemony. Education exists not only to change students, but to enhance their lives. Jackson, et al. (1993) suggests that schools are in positions to influence character, self-esteem, habits and actions and much of it is unintentional. They even go as far as to say that, sometimes, schools may even cause harm or influence corruptions. It is done “without the full awareness and thoughtful engagement of those in charge” (p. xii). We must begin to consciously consider the social role that schools play in the lives of our students. Dewey (1959) noted that the school introduced and trained each child to be a member of a community by implanting him with the spirit of service and self-direction

In a postmodern view, Slattery (2006) suggested that curriculum was enhanced by the autobiographical testimonies of all involved in the development of curriculum. In presenting personal testimony, a community of rich diversity is revealed. Prior experience and its presentation as legitimate knowledge encourages us to “think about education as a life process rather than a static set of information or procedures” (p. 81). Slattery encourages educators to consider moving beyond thinking that there are absolute principles on which to base knowledge. He states:

Curriculum debates must be redirected to the understanding of curriculum, the construction of the individual in relation to educative moments, the development of autobiographical, aesthetic, intuitive, and proleptic

experience, and the sociocultural and sociopolitical relations emerging form an understanding of the individual in relation to knowledge, other learners, the world and ultimately the self. In short, we must move from the modern paradigm of curriculum in various contexts in order to move toward justice, compassion, and ecological sustainability. (p. 292)

Schools also provide an opportunity for upward mobility (Greene, 1995). Greene notes that skills for upward mobility became more complex as factory and menial jobs decreased and services increased. Curriculum content had to be changed to meet the needs of a changing society by providing integrated and interdisciplinary context. Cornbleth's (1991) work argued that "contextual elements were multidimensional, fluid, and intersecting" and that one must "examine directly a) the constraints and opportunities as well as the seemingly contradictory messages that are communicated by curriculum practice and the school milieu, and b) how these are mediated by students" (Pinar, 1995, p. 256). Aronowitz and Giroux (1991) add that school knowledge must build upon the tacit and cultural knowledge that students already possess.

## **Evaluation**

Good evaluation performs several functions. It diagnoses. It provides an opportunity to revise. It compares. It anticipates needs and it determines if objectives have been achieved (Eisner, 2002). It goes beyond testing, grading and measurements. Eisner, known for his extensive work in evaluation, developed eight criteria for appraising assessment practices in education. Those criteria include real world tasks, problem-solving tasks, the community's intellectual value in relation to the tasks, collaborative efforts, multiple acceptable answers, curricular relevance without

limitations, sensitivity to the entire configuration, and a student-selected method for displaying what has been learned.

In his 1991 work, Eisner encourages the critics of education to consider practical ways to conduct inquiry in the field. He noted that qualitative thinking is not a special activity. Qualitative decision-making is part of our daily lives. Decisions on where we choose to live, whom we choose as a mate, career choices, and many other mundane, daily decisions are based on qualitative considerations. In education research, qualitative inquiries take place in schools, in classrooms and in teachers' lounges. It also goes beyond human interaction to consider such things as school architecture, classroom designs, lunchroom designs and even the placement of the school trophy cabinet.

Miller (1992) explored research through teachers' lore. She described lore as the "framework or scaffolding upon which to build understandings of myself as an active creator of knowledge about teaching, curriculum, and research...teacher lore signifies the common threads that weave together the tapestry of teachers' experiences and knowledges" (p. 14). Essentially, teacher lore is the sharing of experiences and challenges from the classroom.

Qualitative research can be conducted on anything that affects education. The purpose of such inquiry is to "highlight, to explain, to provide directions the reader can take into account"...guides can "call to our attention aspects of the situation or place we might otherwise miss" (Eisner, 1991, p. 59). Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen (1993) remind us that we should not be judgmental when conducting research because the temptation to judge other teachers can be impulsive and premature. "The general rule,

then, boils down to rather bland advice: be cautious but not too cautious; circumspect, but still decisive” (p. 172).

Creation of one’s own knowledge is an important aspect of postformal education. In Kincheloe and Steinberg’s (1983) postformal view, thinking and teaching become “whatever an individual, a student, or a teacher can produce in the realm of new understandings and knowledge within the confines of a critical system of meaning” (p. 301). They believe that within this view lies the ability to change the future of teaching and our schools. Teachers and students both implement self-reflection to find meaning beyond the results of standardized tests. This thinking encourages to teachers plan their lessons from the perspectives of their “Asian students, the Black students, their Latino students, their White students, their poor students, their middle- and upper-middle-class students, their traditionally successful students, their unsuccessful students” (p. 308). This is a challenging and potentially overwhelming task, at least, until such a time that society has incorporated these views into our daily lifestyles and ways of thinking.

McCutcheon (1982) encouraged teachers to take on the role of researcher and develop their own personal theories that mesh with their own personalities, unique situations, beliefs and values. Development of a theory based on personal inquiry would guide them in their daily work in and outside the classroom. Whether it is qualitative inquiry, postformal self-reflection or through the exploration of teacher and student lore, evaluation is essential. We must also admit that some quantitative research is necessary.

### **Conclusion**

The search for my personal theory has been a journey that has not yet ended with the writing of this paper. I have much more to learn. As classmate Lee Ann Porter noted in

referencing the work of Cleo Cherryholmes (1982), determining a curriculum theory should be “considered more of a ‘search’ and not a ‘statement’” (Porter, Not Published, p. 2). I started this journey somewhat firmly grounded on the work of the traditionalists such as Herbart, Tyler and Taba. Their work provided the framework that I thought I needed to meet my personal desires for organization and structure of “what” and “how.” While I still believe their guidance can produce the foundation for curricular work, I now believe that it must be developed further by assimilating the “why” that creates the synergy of the ever-changing classroom experience.

I believe that the role of the individual is of utmost importance. While the opportunity for the teacher to express his or her individuality and maintain a personal identity is an integral part of the education process, the individuality of the student is essential. Eisner (1991) stated that “Schooling needs to be ‘known’ in the Old Testament biblical sense: by direct, intimate contact” (p. 11). I believe this to be true. I believe the teacher should make every effort to understand her or his students and attempt to view the curriculum from each individual perspective. It is essential to relate all experiences to the present for we can only understand the past and the future in the context of the present (Slattery, 2006). While at first this seems daunting, I think with practice it will become habit.

I believe that teachers should have the freedom and prudence to adapt curriculum to meet the needs of the collective classroom as well as the individual student. I also believe that it is a moral obligation to treat each student fairly and respectfully. T. S. Elliott (1952) stated that “to know what we want in education we must know what we want in general; we derive our theory of education from our philosophy of life” (p. 132).

The goal of education should be the promotion of the self-actualization of the student for his or her own well-being which directly influences the well-being of our socioeconomic structures and society as a whole.

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