

THE CURRICULUM

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A. DEFINITION OF THE CONCEPT OF CURRICULUM

According to the history of education, the term ‘curriculum’ was originally related to the concept of a course of studies followed by a pupil in a teaching institution. The concept of “curriculum” was used in the English-speaking tradition as equivalent to the French concept *programme d’études*. Nevertheless, in recent decades, the concept of curriculum has evolved and gained in importance. Increasingly, it is used universally within the framework of globalization, the theory of pedagogy and the sociology of education. At the same time, the concept acquired such an importance that since the 1990s certain authors underscored the risk of an invading epistemology (i.e. the concept being used to indicate all dimensions of the educational process, without allowing any differentiated analytical approach to its complexity).

In fact, the term curriculum is mostly used to refer to the existing contract between society, the State and educational professionals with regard to the educational experiences that learners should undergo during a certain phase of their lives. For the majority of authors and experts, the curriculum defines: (i) why; (ii) what; (iii) when; (iv) where; (v) how; and (vi) with whom to learn.

Using educational concepts, we can say that the curriculum defines the educational foundations and contents, their sequencing in relation to the amount of time available for the learning experiences, the characteristics of the teaching institutions, the characteristics of the learning experiences, in particular from the point of view of methods to be used, the resources for learning and teaching (e.g. textbooks and new technologies), evaluation and teachers’ profiles.

Originally, the curriculum was considered as the product of a technical process. In other words, as a document prepared by experts, depending on the state of the art of disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge. Benjamin Bloom and Hilda Taba were the most well-known authors of this period.

Following the works of Stenhauser as well as of other researchers in education, the major part of the educational community considers that the curriculum has both a political dimension and a technical or professional dimension. Indeed, the curriculum relates to the connections between the goals of education and everyday life in learning institutions, schools, colleges and universities. According to one of the most significant theorists of the curriculum, this defines

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‘what counts as valid knowledge’ (Bernstein, 1973, p. 85). Increasingly, theorists of education recognize the political component of the curriculum—the fact that the curriculum is a field of ideological and political struggle that takes place in each society in order to give meaning to education. It is recognized that this meaning not only originates among experts, following professional criteria, but also through complex cultural processes.

Thus, the curriculum is an intangible process that also has a material expression. The typical product of this process is one or several documents adopted at a given time by the political and educational authorities. In a narrow sense, the definitions contained in the produced curricula can be found in other curricular documents. In a wider sense, textbooks and teaching guides are also considered as curricular documents because they contribute to the production of meaning and to guide the teaching and learning process.

With regard to material expression in a narrow sense, i.e. the official curriculum or documents adopted by the political and educational authorities, it could be said that these texts are increasingly flexible and open to teachers’ interpretations.

This flexibility has progressively led to the recognition of a hidden curriculum—one that is not written. This hidden curriculum could be viewed as the entire range of educational experiences promoted by schools and teachers through practices that are neither necessarily obligations nor written down. Research has highlighted, for example, the existence of a sexist hidden curriculum (discriminatory with regard to women) or a class-based hidden curriculum (discriminatory with regard to the poor). This situation may exist while the explicit contents proposed by the official curricular documents denounce discrimination against women or are specifically in favour of overcoming poverty. In fact, the recognition of the existence of a hidden curriculum drew attention to the existence of verbal and non-verbal messages built into educational practices, but also the possibility of becoming aware of it and of modifying teachers’ practices.

B. THE CURRICULUM AS A PROCESS

On the basis of these facts and observations, the concept of the curriculum as a product became associated more and more with the concept of curriculum development (as a process). But before defining it, it may be useful to reveal some of the most common procedures of curriculum development in official documents.

In centralized countries, such as France or Chile, this document is usually approved by the Ministry of National Education. In federal countries, it is approved by the authorities in individual states. Nevertheless, there are transversal tendencies today. The large centralized countries are attempting to move towards the decentralized definition of some aspects of the educational contract. On the other hand, federations are trying to find elements of national cohesion by introducing ‘common contents’, as in Argentina, ‘national parameters’, as in Brazil, or ‘standards’, as in the majority of the most advanced English-speaking countries (for example the United Kingdom or Australia during the 1990s).

The existence of these transversal currents is associated with the strengthening of the ‘intangible’ element in the curriculum: ‘curriculum development’, understood as a process implying a wide range of decisions concerning learning experiences, taken by different actors

at different levels: politicians, experts, teachers; at the national, provincial, local, school and also international levels.

In some cases, the curriculum development process proceeds from the top downwards. The most usual term to indicate this type of process is the English expression “top-down”. In this case, curriculum development processes can be defined through four phases: (i) the curriculum presented to teachers; (ii) the curriculum adopted by teachers; (iii) the curriculum assimilated by learners; and (iv) the evaluated curriculum. The majority of centralized countries follow this type of curriculum development process.

In some other cases, the curriculum development process proceeds from the bottom upwards (a “bottom-up” process). In this case as well, four different phases can be identified: (i) what the society or the parents want; (ii) responses provided by teachers in the schools; (iii) the collection of these responses and the effort to identify some common aspects; and (iv) the development of common standards and their evaluation. The majority of decentralized countries follow this type of curriculum development process or processes, which are carried out in each school in the context of its community, but without necessarily taking into consideration the developments adopted by other schools or institutions.

C. A NEW APPROACH OF CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

The current trend is to promote networked curriculum development with several interactions (top-down and bottom-up), while trying to take into account the needs—not only the educational requirements—and to rebuild the way of conceptualizing reality and education systems, in order that political authorities are no longer found at the top, but in the centre of curriculum development dynamics. These authorities thus become stimulating bodies that promote multiple interactions between teaching institutions and society, jointly defining the meaning, the knowledge, the methods and the spaces of education.

There are several groups working on the curriculum. Nevertheless, comparative studies on the curriculum are not yet abundant. The discipline “comparative education” has rather dealt with issues such as the definition of educational policies, education system structures and trends of schooling worldwide. In recent years, however, a need for more comparative research in the field of the curriculum has come to the fore. Indeed, in recent years, various comparative research projects on students’ learning achievements have been carried out, especially in the most advanced countries of the world. These research programmes could be considered as producing an “international evaluated curriculum”, although this issue has not set off much reaction among the international community. On the other hand, the gathering and analysis of information on the curriculum offered to teachers and as taught in educational institutions is not sufficiently developed. To meet existing needs in terms of information, especially for better promoting education to live together in an increasingly interdependent world, UNESCO’s International Bureau of Education (www.ibe.unesco.org), based in Geneva, has received a new mission. Within the framework of this mission, the IBE is one of the sources giving access to information about curricula in the contemporary world and contributing to comparative education.

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