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The Reconceptualization of Curriculum Studies

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What some observers have designated a 'movement' is visible in the field of curriculum studies in the United States. Some have termed it 'reconceptualism', others 'the new curriculum theory'. Both terms suggest more thematic unity among the curriculum writing characterized as the 'reconceptualization' than, upon close examination, appears to exist. Nonetheless, some thematic similarities are discernible, though insufficient in number to warrant a characterization like 'ideology' or composite, agreed-upon point of view. What can be said, without dispute, is that by the summer of 1978, there will have been six conferences and five books¹ in the past six years which are indications of a socio-intellectual phenomenon in this field, and a phenomenon which clearly functions to reconceptualize the field of curriculum studies. Thus, while the writing published to date may be somewhat varied thematically, it is unitary in its significance for the field. If this process of transformation continues at its present rate, the field of curriculum studies will be profoundly different in 20 years time than it has been during the first 50 years of its existence.

What is this reconceptualization? The answer, at this point, is a slippery one, and to gain even an inchoate grip, one looks to the field as it is. This will indicate, in part, what is not. To a considerable extent, the reconceptualization is a reaction to what the field has been, and what it is seen to be at the present time.

Traditionalists

Most curricularists at work in 1977 can be characterized as *traditionalists*. Their work continues to make use of the 'conventional wisdom' of the field, epitomized still by the work of Tyler. More important in identifying traditionalists than the allusion to Tyler is citing the *raison d'être* for traditional curriculum work. Above all, the reason for curriculum writing, indeed curriculum work generally, is captured in the phrase 'service to practitioners'. Curriculum work tends to be field-based and curriculum writing tends to have school teachers in

mind. In short, traditional curriculum work is focused on the schools. Further, professors of curriculum have tended to be former school people. In fact, school service of some sort, ordinarily classroom teaching, is still viewed as a pre-requisite for a teaching post in the field in a college or university. To an extent not obvious in certain of the other subfields of education (for instance, philosophy and psychology of education, recently in administration and the 'helping services'), curricularists are former school people whose intellectual and subcultural ties tend to be with school practitioners. They tend to be less interested in basic research, in theory development, in related developments in allied fields, than in a set of perceived realities of classrooms and school settings generally.

There is, of course, an historical basis for traditional curriculum work. Cremin suggests that it was after superintendent Newlon's work in curriculum revision, in the early 1920s in Denver, that the need for a curriculum specialist became clear.² It is plausible to imagine school administrators like Newlon asking teachers who demonstrated an interest in curriculum and its development to leave classroom teaching and enter an administrative office from which they would attend full-time to matters curricular. There were no departments of curriculum in colleges of education in the 1920s; Newlon and other administrators could go nowhere else but to the classroom for curriculum personnel. When the training of curriculum personnel began at the university level in the 1930s, it surfaced in departments of administration and secondary education, indicating further the field's origin in and loyalty to the practical concerns of school personnel. This affiliation, more tenuous and complex at the present time than it was in the 1920s and 1930s, is evident in the programmes of the largest professional association of curricularists in the United States, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. The programmes of ASCD annual meetings indicate a considerable and growing presence of school personnel. Further, the workshops and papers listed, the authors of which are university teachers, tend to have an explicit thematic focus on whatever school concerns are *au courant*.

There is another sense in which traditionalists carry forward the tradition of the field. The curriculum field's birth in the 1920s was understandably shaped by the intellectual character of that period. Above all it was a time of an emerging scientism when so-called scientific techniques from business and industry were finding their way into educational theory and practice. The early curricularist came to employ what Kliebard has termed the 'bureaucratic model'.³ This model is characterized by its ameliorative orientation, ahistorical posture, and an allegiance to behaviourism and to what Macdonald has termed a 'technological rationality'. The curriculum worker is dedicated to the 'improvement' of schools. He honours this dedication by accepting the curriculum structure as it is. 'Curriculum change' is measured by comparing resulting behaviours with original objectives. Even humanistic educators tend to accept many of these premises, as they introduce, perhaps, 'values clarification' into the school curriculum. Accepting the curriculum structure as it is, and working to improve it, is what is meant by the 'technician's mentality'. In a capsule way, it can be likened to adjusting an automobile engine part in order to make it function more effectively. This is also technological rationality, and its manifestations in school practice run the gamut from 'competency-based teacher education' to 'modular scheduling'. The emphasis is on design, change (behaviourally observable), and

improvement.

What has tended to be regarded as curriculum theory in the traditional sense, most notably Tyler's rationale,⁴ is theoretical only in the questionable sense that it is abstract and usually at variance with what occurs in schools. Its intent is clearly to guide, to be of assistance to those in institutional positions who are concerned with curriculum. Of course, this is a broad concern. Most teachers share it, at least in terms of daily lesson planning. But as well as an element of teaching, curriculum is traditionally thought to include considerations such as evaluation, supervision, and also curriculum development and implementation. The boundaries of the field are fuzzy.

Thematically there is no unity. From Tyler to Taba and Saylor and Alexander to the current expression of this genre in Daniel and Laurel Tanner's book, Neil's and Zais' writing (all of which attempt an overview of considerations imagined pertinent to a curriculum worker) to the humanistic movement, (for instance the work of such individuals as Fantini, Jordan, Simon, Weinstein) is a broad thematic territory.⁵ What makes this work one territory is its fundamental interest in working with school people, with revising the curricula of schools. Traditional writing tends to be journalistic, necessarily so, in order that it can be readily accessible to a readership seeking quick answers to pressing, practical problems. The publications of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development also exemplify, to a considerable extent, this writing. ASCD is the traditionalists' professional organization. Relatively speaking, there exists a close relationship between traditional curricularists and school personnel.

Conceptual-empiricists

A relationship between school personnel and the other two groups of curricularists—*conceptual-empiricists* and *reconceptualists*—also exists. But the nature of this relationship differs from the alliance historically characteristic of the field. This difference becomes clearer as we examine, momentarily, a second group of curricularists, a group which, until reconceptualists appeared, seemed to be the only heir to the field.

I use the word heir advisedly, for the traditional curriculum field has been declared terminally ill or already deceased by several influential observers, among them Schwab and Huebner.⁶ What has caused, in the past 15 to 20 years, the demise of the field? A comprehensive answer to this important question is inappropriate in the present context. What can be pointed to is two-fold. First, the leadership of the so-called curriculum reform movement of the 1960s was outside the field. This bypass was a crippling blow to its professional status. If those whose work was curriculum development and implementation were called on primarily as consultants and only rarely at that, then clearly their claim to specialized knowledge and expertise was questionable. Second, the economic situation of the past six years has meant a drying up of funds for in-service work and for curriculum proposals generally. A field whose professional status was irreparably damaged now lost the material basis necessary for its functioning. How could curricularists work with school people without money or time for in-service workshops? How could curriculum proposals be

implemented without requisite funds?

With the traditional, practical justification of the field attenuated—even teacher-training efforts have slowed dramatically—new justifications appeared. Curriculum and other education subfields have become increasingly vulnerable to criticisms regarding scholarly standards by colleagues in so-called cognate fields. Particularly the influence of colleagues in the social sciences is evident, paralleling the political ascendancy of these disciplines in the university generally. In fact, research in education, in many instances, has become indistinguishable from social science research. The appearance and proliferation of conceptual-empiricists in the curriculum field is a specific instance of this general phenomenon. There remains, of course, the notion that research has implications for classroom practice, but it is usually claimed that many years of extensive research are necessary before significant implications can be obtained.

This development has gone so far that, examining the work done by a faculty in a typical American college of education, one has little sense of education as a field with its own identity. One discovers researchers whose primary identity is with the cognate field. Such individuals view themselves as primarily psychologists, philosophers, or sociologists with ‘research interests’ in schools and education-related matters. By 1978, it is accurate to note that the education field has lost whatever (and it was never complete of course) intellectual autonomy it possessed in earlier years, and now is nearly tantamount to a colony of superior, imperialistic powers.

The view that education is not a discipline in itself but an area to be studied by the disciplines is evident in the work of those of curricularists I have called conceptual-empiricists. The work of this group can be so characterized, employing conceptual and empirical in the sense social scientists typically employ them. This work is concerned with developing hypotheses to be tested, and testing them in methodological ways characteristic of mainstream social science. This work is reported, ordinarily, at meetings of the American Educational Research Association. Just as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development is the traditionalists’ organization, AERA tends to be the organization of conceptual-empiricists. (In relatively small numbers traditionalists and reconceptualists also read papers at AERA annual meetings.)

An illustrative piece of conceptual work from this second group of curricularists was published in the AERA-sponsored *Review of Educational Research*. It is George Posner’s (with Kenneth Strike) ‘A categorization scheme for principles of sequencing content’. A prefatory paragraph indicates that his view is a social scientist’s one, reliant upon hypothesis-making, data collection, and interpretation.

We have very little information, based on hard data, regarding the consequences of alternative content sequences and will need a good deal more research effort before we are able to satisfactorily suggest how content *should* be sequenced. Our intention here is to consider the question, What are the alternatives?²⁷

The article is a conceptual one, concerned with what the authors view as logically defensible content sequencing alternatives, and it is empirical in its allegiance to the view of empirical research, one yielding ‘hard data’, typical of social science at the present time.

In a recently published essay, Decker F. Walker, another visible conceptual-empiricist, moves away somewhat from strict social science as exemplified in Posner's work.⁸ His essay, or case study as he terms it, is more anthropological in its methodological form, demonstrating a type of curriculum research which Walker's co-editor Reid endorses.⁹ Anthropology, it should be noted, while regarded as not as 'pure' a social science as political science or psychology, is nonetheless generally categorized as a social science.

Taking his cue from Schwab, Walker argues that prescriptive curriculum theories, (partly because they do not reflect the actual process of curriculum change) are not useful. Rather than focus on why curriculum developers did not follow the Tyler rationale, Walker concentrates on how, in fact, the developers did proceed. In his study he finds little use for terms like objectives and important use for terms such as platform and deliberation. He concludes that curricularists probably ought to abandon the attempt to make actual curriculum development mirror prescriptive theories, accept 'deliberation' as a core aspect of the development process, and apply the intellectual resources of the field toward improving the quality of deliberation and employing it more effectively.

This work I find significant to the field in two ways. First it deals another hard blow to the Tyler rationale and its influence. Second, Walker is moving away from social science. His work remains social science, but it is closer to the work of some reconceptualists than it is to that of Posner, and other mainstream conceptual-empiricists. Walker retains the traditional focus upon the practical concerns of school people and school curriculum, and no doubt he has and will spend a portion of his professional time on actual curriculum projects. Further, his methods seem more nearly those of the ethnomethodologist whose approaches do not easily fit the picture of conventional theories of the middle range, as projected by individuals such as the sociologist Robert Merton, who has influenced so many conceptual-empirical studies in the field of sociology. Walker appears to be moving outside mainstream conceptual-empiricism.

Also in the Reid and Walker book is work by another visible conceptual-empiricist, Ian Westbury. With his co-author Lynn McKinney, Westbury studies the Gary, Indiana school system during the period 1940-1970.¹⁰ Like Walker's study of the art project, McKinney and Westbury's study would seem to be outside mainstream conceptual-empiricism, even close to work characteristic of the humanities. The structure of the study, however, indicates its allegiance to social science, thus warranting its categorization as conceptual-empirical. The work is a historical study done in the service of generalization, work that has interest in the particular (the Gary district) as it contributes to understanding of the general. The 'general' in this instance is the phenomenon of stability and change, which the authors 'now believe are the two primary functions of the administrative structure which surround the schools'.¹¹ Finally what the study demonstrates is 'that a concern for goals without a concomitant concern for organizational matters addresses only a small part of the problem of conceiving new designs for schools'.¹² This use of the specific to illustrate a general, ahistorical 'law' is, of course, a fundamental procedure of mainstream social science.

Reconceptualists

This concern for generalization is not abandoned in the work of the third group

of curricularists, the reconceptualists. For example, at the fourth conference at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Professor Apple reported the results of a study he and a colleague conducted in a kindergarten, substantiating claims he has made before regarding the socio-political functions of classroom behaviour.¹³ His case study is distinguishable from the work of a typical conceptual-empiricist in two significant respects: (1) his acknowledged 'value-laden' perspective, and (2) a perspective with a politically emancipatory intent. That is, in contrast to the canon of traditional social science, which prescribes data collection, hypothesis substantiation or disconfirmation in the disinterested service of building a body of knowledge, a reconceptualist tends to see research as an inescapably political as well as intellectual act. As such, it works to suppress, or to liberate, not only those who conduct the research, and those upon whom it is conducted, but as well those outside the academic subculture. Mainstream social science research, while on the surface seemingly apolitical in nature and consequence, if examined more carefully can be seen as contributing to the maintenance of the contemporary social-political order, or contributing to its dissolution. Apple and Marxists and neo-Marxists go further and accept a teleological view of historical movement, allying themselves with the lower classes, whose final emergence from oppression is seen to be inevitable. A number of reconceptualists, while not Marxists, nonetheless accept some variation of this teleological historical view. And many of these, at least from a distance, would seem to be 'leftists' of some sort. Nearly all accept that a political dimension is inherent in any intellectual activity.

This political emphasis distinguishes the work of Apple, Burton, Mann, Molnar, some of the work of Huebner and Macdonald, from the work of traditionalists and conceptual-empiricists.¹⁴ It is true that Reid and Walker in their *Case Studies in Curriculum Change* acknowledge that curriculum development is political, but the point is never developed, and never connected with a view of history and the contemporary social order. The focus of Walker's case study and of other case studies in the book is limited to literal curriculum change, without historicizing this change, indicating its relationship to contemporary historical movement generally. In the 1975 ASCD year-book, on the other hand, which is edited by Macdonald and Zaret, with essays also by Apple, Burton, Huebner, and Mann, this siting of curriculum issues in the broad intellectual-historical currents of twentieth-century life is constant.¹⁵ Macdonald speaks, for instance, of technological rationality, an intellectual mode comparable in its pervasiveness and taken-for-grantedness to the ascendancy of technology in human culture at large.¹⁶ Such individuals would argue that comprehension of curriculum issues is possible only when they are situated historically.

The 1975 ASCD year-book speaks to school people. It is not that reconceptualists do not speak to this constituency of the curriculum field. But there is a conscious abandonment of the 'technician's mentality'. There are no prescriptions or traditional rationales. What this year-book offers, instead, is heightened awareness of the complexity and historical significance of curriculum issues. Because the difficulties these reconceptualists identify are related to difficulties in the culture at large, they are not 'problems' that can be 'solved'. That concept created by technological rationality, is itself problematic. Thus, what is necessary, in part, is fundamental structural change in the culture. Such an aspiration cannot be realized by 'plugging into' the extant order. That is why an elective

or two on Marx in high-school social studies classes, or the teaching of autobiographical reflection in English classes bring indifference and often alarm to most reconceptualists. That 'plugging into', 'co-opting' it was termed in the 1960s during the student protests, accepts the social order as it is. What is necessary is a fundamental reconceptualization of what curriculum is, how it functions, and how it might function in emancipatory ways. It is this commitment to a comprehensive critique and theory development that distinguishes the reconceptualist phenomenon.

To understand more fully the efforts of the individuals involved in inquiry of this kind requires some understanding of metatheory and philosophy of science. Without such grounding, it is difficult, if not impossible, for curricularists to see clearly their work in the context of the growth of knowledge in general. Max van Manen's paper at the 1976 Wisconsin conference was a significant effort to analyse various structures of theoretic knowledge as they related to dominant modes of inquiry in the field of curriculum.¹⁷ His work builds on basic analyses undertaken by philosophers of science such as Radnitzky and Feyerabend.¹⁸ More work needs to be done along this line.

The reconceptualization, it must be noted, is fundamentally an intellectual phenomenon, not an interpersonal-affiliative one. Reconceptualists have no organized group, such as ASCD or AERA. Individuals at work, while sharing certain themes and motives, do not tend to share any common interpersonal affiliation. (In this one respect their work parallels that of the so-called romantic critics of the 1960s. But here any such comparison stops.) Conferences have been held yearly; the most recent on the campus of Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, New York. A journal and a press emphasizing this work are scheduled to appear by 1979.

Conclusion

As an interpreter of metatheories, Richard Bernstein recently analysed, in detail, individuals at work in four areas—empirical research, philosophical analysis, phenomenology and critical theory of society.¹⁹ (The first category corresponds to conceptual-empirical, the third and fourth to reconceptualist work.) He ends his study with this conviction:

In the final analysis we are not confronted with exclusive choices: either empirical or interpretative theory or critical theory.

Rather there is an internal dialectic in the restructuring of social political theory: when we work through any one of these movements we discover the others are implicated.²⁰

This is so in the field of curriculum studies also. We are not faced with an exclusive choice: either the traditional wisdom of the field, or conceptual-empiricism, or the reconceptualization. Each is reliant upon the other. For the field to become vital and significant to American education it must nurture each 'moment', its 'internal dialectic'. And it must strive for synthesis, for a series of perspectives on curriculum that are at once empirical, interpretative, critical, emancipatory.

But such nurturance and synthesis do not characterize, on the whole, the field today. Some of the issues raised by the British sociologist David

Silverman are germane here.²¹ As a prologue to more adequate social science theorizing, Silverman proposes that we learn how to read Castaneda's account of his apprenticeship to Don Juan in order that we may come to know the kinds of questions that need to be asked. He is convinced that mainstream conceptual-empiricists, regardless of field, do not now know what questions to ask, and are, indeed, intolerant of reconceptualizations that differ from their own. This intolerance is discernible in the American curriculum field. To some extent it can be found in each group of curricularists.

I am convinced that this intolerance among curricularists for work differing from one's own must be suspended to some extent if significant intellectual movement in the field is to occur. Becoming open to another genre of work does not mean loss of one's capacity for critical reflection. Nor does it mean, necessarily, loss of intellectual identity. One may remain a traditionalist while sympathetically studying the work of a reconceptualist. One's own point of view may well be enriched. Further, an intellectual climate may become established in which could develop syntheses of current perspectives, regenerating the field, and making more likely that its contribution to American education be an important one.

Acknowledgment

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References and notes

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At a 1976 conference held at the State University of New York at Geneseo; Professors Apple, Greene, Kliebard and Huebner read papers. Each of these persons has been associated with the reconceptualists although the chairmen of this meeting, Professors DeMarte and Rosarie, did not see this seminar as being in the tradition of the others. The papers from this seminar were published in *Curriculum Inquiry*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (1977).
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