



Volume 21 Issue 1, 2021

Curriculum purposes and design

Kerry Earl Rinehart

Editor: *Kerry Earl Rinehart*

To cite this article: Rinehart, K. (2021). Curriculum purposes and design. *Teachers and Curriculum*, 21(1), 1–5.
<https://doi.org/10.15663/tandc.v21i1.378>

To link to this volume: <https://doi.org/10.15663/tandc.v21i1>

Copyright of articles

Authors retain copyright of their publications.

Articles are subject to the Creative commons license: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/legalcode>

Summary of the Creative Commons license.

Author and users are free to

Share—copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format

Adapt—remix, transform, and build upon the material

The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms.

Under the following terms

Attribution—You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use

Non-Commercial—You may not use the material for commercial purposes

ShareAlike—If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original

No additional restrictions – You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

Open Access Policy

This journal provides immediate open access to its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge.

CURRICULUM PURPOSES AND DESIGN

KERRY EARL RINEHART

*The University of Waikato
New Zealand*

In this General Issue of *Teachers and Curriculum* for 2021, I am pleased that our attention will turn to issues concerning curriculum, curricular change and curricular theory. My purpose in this preview of Issue 21 is to suggest some ideas to engage reader deliberation and discussion. If your interest is sparked, please follow up by reading the original sources noted.

In education, a curriculum (“/kəˈrɪkjʊləm/; plural curricula /kəˈrɪkjʊlə/ or curriculums”, Wikipedia) often refers specifically to officially sanctioned and documented, planned, content and progressions of teaching or learning goals. Education systems—and curriculums within them—reflect dominant social values and norms. Official curriculums may therefore be highly standardised, or may range to a high level of school, teacher or learner autonomy.

Everyone who has attended schooling has notions of the role of education, schools, teachers and learners. Education is a subject spoken about by educators, educational researchers, curriculum and policy writers, politicians and employers, by people over coffee, at dinner parties and in families. Ideas about what needs to be included in an official curriculum to be taught in compulsory education settings depends on who is asked and the beliefs they hold about the role of education and its purpose. As an example, every person could, by deeply examining their values and beliefs, identify desirable elements of a curriculum for learning in centres and schools. Larry Cuban (2012) wrote:

Many practitioners (and the public) highly value standardizing curriculum and instruction for students. They believe that a uniform curriculum will lead to improved test scores and higher graduation and college admission rates while closing achievement gaps between minorities and whites. Common standards and instruction, they believe, will produce equal opportunity. (p. 10)

Of course, rather than *producing* opportunity, some standardised curriculums may simply *reflect* opportunities. While Cuban recognises positive aspects of standardisation, others believe that addressing the diversity of learner needs, differentiation and personalised learning is the way to ensure better outcomes for more students. At times, reforms have moved to more differentiated, local and individuated curriculum policy and other times to more centralised and standardised curriculum. In a nutshell, Cuban asks and answers the key question, “Why has this struggle over conflicting values occurred time and again? Because schooling is a value-loaded enterprise” (2012, p. 12).

For some people, a key aim for junior levels of school is preparation for more senior levels, and in senior school learning becomes a preparation for an individual’s participation and contribution in society and economy. “Preparation”, however, is seen to have its limitations. John Dewey (1938/2015) wrote:

Now “preparation” is a treacherous idea. In a certain sense every experience should do something to prepare a person for later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality. That is the very meaning of growth, continuity, reconstruction of experience. But it is a mistake to suppose that the mere acquisition of a certain amount of arithmetic, geography, history, etc., which is taught and studied because it may be useful at some time in the future, has this effect, and it is a mistake to suppose the acquisition of skills in reading and figuring will automatically constitute preparation for their right and effective use under conditions very unlike those in which they were acquired. (p. 47)

Corresponding author

Kerry Earl Rinehart kerry.rinehart@waikato.ac.nz

ISSN: 2382-0349

Pages 1–5

Transferability of content knowledge and skills, along with levels of qualification and preparation, is of interest to employers. Alan de Botton, in a piece for the *New Statesman* back in 2013, wrote:

[T]he consensus is that education needs to get better, by which people mean that our exam results have to get more impressive and that we have to become more skilled at competing with other countries, especially—and particularly in maths. In this account, the point of education is to make you a good worker, able to pull in a good salary and help the GDP of the nation.

Those familiar with de Botton's work will understand that he sees this economic purpose for education as both limited and limiting for individuals, communities and public life. Instead, de Botton sees that the purpose of education revolves around humanity, and its ultimate 'purpose' is 'to make us fully human'. Education, for de Botton, is not only asking questions of human nature but also answering them:

The purpose of all education is to spare people time and error. It's a tool whereby society attempts to teach reliably, within a few years, what it took the very brightest and most determined of our ancestors centuries of painful effort to work out. (2013)

De Botton's ideas resonate with Dewey's, who believed:

The purpose of school education is to insure the continuance of education by organizing the powers that insure growth. The inclination to learn from life itself and to make the conditions of life such that all will learn in the process of living is the finest product of schooling (Dewey, 2011, p. 51)

Such growth occurs, according to Dewey, through a learner's interactions with a wise and responsible older person, the teachers, who have more experience to draw on. They can provide light on what experiences, in general, are most conducive to learner growth and development in desirable directions. Fundamental to growth and learning from living is learning to think. Dewey believed that improved thinking skills—critical thinking, problem solving and decision-making—would generate improved learning outcomes for learners, groups and communities (1910). Matt Berman, who discusses the similarities in ideas between Dewey and Mathew Lipman (who developed the philosophy for children programme), wrote "if the quality of life is improved by thinking, then the best education will teach a child to think, to think well, to think clearly and critically and to think for himself [sic]" (Lipman, 1987, p. 28).

Obviously, even among experts there remain differences of opinion regarding the purposes and reasons for structured educational curriculums. Gert Biesta, for example, believes the purpose of education is multidimensional "because education tends to function in relation to a number of domains ... three domains can be found, viz., qualification, socialisation and subjectification" (2015, p. 77):

Qualification: "important because it allows children and young people to 'do' something—it qualifies them. This 'doing' can be very specific, such as in the field of vocational and professional education, or it can be conceived more widely, such as in general education that seeks to prepare children and young people for their lives in complex modern societies".

Socialisation: "is partly an explicit aim of education (to represent and initiate children and young people in traditions and ways of being and doing, such as cultural, professional, political, religious traditions, etc.) but, as research in the sociology of education has shown, also works behind the backs of students and teachers, for example in the ways in which education reproduces existing social structures, divisions and inequalities".

Subjectification: "to do with the way in which children and young people come to exist as subjects of initiative and responsibility rather than as objects of the actions of others" (Biesta, 2015, p. 77)

Rather than chunks of knowledge and selected skills, for some people what constitutes a desirable curriculum might focus more on de Botton's *human nature* and Biesta's *subjectification* with ideas about human needs. People from the fields of education, philosophy and lifestyle have identified what they see as important human needs. A sense of self-worth is one of our human needs, according to Csikszentmihalyi (2003), de Botton (2004) and Glasser (1975 cited in Macfarlane, 1997). That feeling that others accord us worth and respect has an impact on our own sense of self-worth. Glasser (1975) is cited by Angus Macfarlane as having stated, "a person gains strength by progressing along four success pathways: giving and receiving love; achieving a sense of worth in one's own eyes and in the eyes of others; having fun; and becoming self-disciplined" (Macfarlane, 1997, p. 164). Macfarlane goes on to write how a person's *mana*—"power, authority, prestige"—is impacted positively or negatively depending on how they "proceed along these pathways" (p. 164).

Peter Adeney (2016) identifies eight human needs as important for later in life: friendship, community, meaningful work (that involves effort), philosophy of life, health, freedom, and privacy. He also speaks of five needs for retirement. He says when retired, people need time outdoors, to be physically active, challenged in mind and body, social to the level that suits the individual and to be helpful and generous. Adeney's advice is to build these aspects into the time people have now rather than wait until retirement to find the lifestyle that meets these needs.

As Carol Tomlinson believes, responding to people's needs and building these aspects into their every day and weeks could start in our educational settings. Tomlinson (2002) wrote that "students have at least five needs that teachers can address to make learning irresistible: affirmation, contribution, purpose, power and challenge" (p. 8).

Affirmation is the need to feel needed and significant.

Contribution is based on the idea that one must contribute to the world and students are looking for a way to contribute in the classroom and school.

Purpose is when students understand what they are doing, and see the significance and relevance of the learning for them.

Power is when students' feel learning is useful and that they can make choices and assess quality of work.

Challenge is when students work at their ability and stretch to beyond their ability with confidence and the ability to succeed with hard work and accountability. (Tomlinson, 2002, p. 8)

Tomlinson (2000) also argues for differentiation ("attention to the diverse needs of learners" (p. 8)) as a philosophy and the basis for teaching and learning in the classroom even under very standardised curriculum objectives because, she writes, "curriculum tells us *what* to teach: Differentiation tells us *how*" (2000, p. 8). Children, through the classroom curriculum, can have purposeful opportunities to be helpful and generous, to make a contribution to their class, school and community and consequently the affirmation can lead to feelings of being noticed and significant. They may have the power of choice about how social they want to be in different learning experiences at different times or whether this means completing activities in small groups, with a partner or individually. Young people need to be challenged in their minds and bodies—when learning is relevant and 'just right'—not too difficult and not too easy.

Therefore, curriculum choices derive from the purpose of education and determine both *what* and *how* something is to be taught, but curriculum also influences and produces how learners' experiences of education may be shaped and evaluated. Many subjects of typical school curriculums, such as reading, writing and oral language, are commonly organised into separate timeslots; according to Dewey, intertwining subjects, or integrating knowledges into sets of problems woven throughout the school day are preferable. Just as Dewey believed that reflection and experience are inseparable, he advocated integrated curriculum learning over siloed acquisition of bodies of knowledge.

Curriculum from an official level to school level are negotiated and enacted at the classroom level. One interesting activity for beginning teachers is to ask them to design their ideal class curriculum for a five-day 9am to 3pm template. Next, they should be asked to include typical additional sessions, such as an hour of library time, an hour in the media suite and an assembly time per week, to their draft curriculum. Finally, the beginning teachers can work in groups to share and negotiate a curriculum for their selected learning level. Would they modify their planned curriculum so that the ‘silos’ of content area become integrated? How might they make emphases on problem solving and critical thinking visible in their curriculum plan? Through such an exercise, beginning teachers would have the opportunity to think about the purpose and design of curriculum to consider their own and others’ views.

How much autonomy and flexibility there is for teaching and learning within an official curriculum brings attention back to ideas about the role of the teacher in teaching, learning and learning conditions. As Dewey (2015) wrote:

Responsibility for selecting objective conditions [of learners’ experience of learning] carries with it, then, the responsibility for understanding the needs and capacities of individuals who are learning at a given time. It is not enough that certain materials and methods have proved effective with other individuals at other times. There must be a reason for thinking that they will function in generating an experience that has educative quality with particular individuals at a particular time. (pp. 45–46).

Biesta (2019) makes a case for “teaching as an act of communication and interpretation that always requires judgement about the ‘what’ and the ‘what for’” (p. 259) thus “the question of the ‘nature’ of teaching connects back to the question of educational purpose” (p. 269). As a strong advocate for the role and status of teachers, Biesta (2015) states that rather than the purpose of education being simply student learning, “the point of education is that students learn *something*, that they learn it for a *reason*, and that they learn it *from someone*” (p. 76). Teachers can engage learners through attention to Tomlinson’s five invitations for learning with integrated and differentiated curriculums for growth through living.

In closing, I return to Cuban (2012), who points to the ongoing tension between conflicting purposes in education between a social/collective goal and individual good: “Public schools seek to achieve social, political, and economic goals while promising each student individual success” (p. 12). Please take what opportunities you have to participate and contribute in curriculum review and revision wherever you are.

References

- Adeney, P. (2016). *How to be rich, happy and save the world. World Domination Summit 2016*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8BDWih309wc>
- Biesta, G. G. (2015). What is education for? On good education, teacher judgement, and educational professionalism. *European Journal of Education*, 50(1), 75–87. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12109>
- Biesta, G. G. (2019). Reclaiming teaching for teacher education: Towards a spiral curriculum. *Beijing International Review of Education*, 1, 259–272.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2003). *Good business. Leadership, flow and the making of meaning*. Viking, Penguin Group.
- Cuban, L. (2012, February). Standards vs. customization: Finding the balance. *Educational Leadership*, 69(5), 10–15.
- De Botton, A. (2013, 18 July). Education is what makes us fully human. *New Statesman* <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2013/07/alain-de-botton-education-what-makes-us-fully-human>
- de Botton, A. (2005). *Status anxiety*. Penguin Books.
- Dewey, J. (1997). *How we think*. United States: Dover Publications. (Original work published in 1910). <https://doi.org/10.1037/10903-000>
- Dewey, J. (2011). *Democracy and education*. Simon & Brown. (Original work published in 1916).

- Dewey, J. (2015). *Experience and education*. Kappa Delta Pi lecture series [no. 10]. The Macmillan Company. (Original work published in 1938).
- Lipman, M. (1987). Dewey and the philosophy for children program. *Analytic Teaching*, 7(2), 25–28.
- Macfarlane, A. (1997). The hikairo rationale teaching students with emotional and behavioural difficulties: A bicultural approach. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 3, 153–168.
<https://doi.org/10.15663/wje.v3i1.499>
- Tomlinson, C. (2000). Reconcilable differences? Standards-based teaching and differentiation. *Educational Leadership*, 58(1), 6–11.
- Tomlinson, C. (2002). Invitations to learn. *Educational Leadership*, 60(1), 6–10.