

Curriculum theory and practice: A comparative literature review

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ABSTRACT

The curriculum has emerged over the past century from a simple list of subject-specific outcomes to an intricate and holistic set of experiences for students to grapple with. This comparative literature review discusses the research related to curriculum theory and practice. It draws upon a range of sources, from Mark K Smith's article on Curriculum Theory and Practice, theoretical discussions of curriculum planning and evaluation to empirical studies of educational planning in varied contexts. The purpose of this research is to evaluate the Theory of Smith as compared to other related literature on curriculum theory and planning. This review discussed curriculum as a transmission of knowledge, a product, a process, and a praxis. The findings found that all approaches to curriculum development as a product of momentary articulations, as well as a dynamic process of collective becoming and reflective action. This paper found that most literature agrees with the theory of Smith. Therefore, this paper concluded that any type of school curriculum should be viewed as a combination of a product, process, and praxis.

1. Introduction

The school curriculum is designed to provide objectives and activities to impart knowledge and skills to students. It serves as the foundation of learning in the classroom by creating a scaffolded experience of problem-solving, creative thinking, and collaborative opportunities (Chiba, Sustarsic, Perriton, & Edwards, 2021). According to Celik (2011), a curriculum should also offer meaningful professional development and support for teachers, helping them meet their own personal learning goals. Curriculum can also be instrumental in preparing students for postsecondary education and career success through the development of literacy, numeracy, inquiry-based practices, global citizenship values, information technology use, creativity, and critical thinking (Torrance, 2007).

Moreover, the curriculum can be quite vague as outcomes, objectives, and material are often not specifically articulated (Richards, 2013). It is not uncommon to find curriculum documents that do not provide adequate details or information specific enough to guide instruction and learning. Additionally, curriculum documents may lack an explanation of the teaching strategies and activities specified for student engagement. Boesen et al. (2014) argued that this vagueness in curriculum can make it difficult for teachers to properly plan their courses, resulting in ineffective learning environments for students.

To mend this problem, exactly 23 years ago, Mark K. Smith published the article Curriculum Theory and Practice. He lay-outed the four approaches to the curriculum, namely:

Curriculum as a body of knowledge to be transmitted; curriculum as an attempt to achieve certain ends in students - product; curriculum as process; and curriculum as praxis (Smith, 2000). The article tried to set the boundary between formal education and informal. Smith argued that curriculum planning should be planned and guided to determine precisely what the school intended to achieve.

Due to the vagueness of some curriculum documents and the approach suggested by Smith (2000) to mend this vagueness in the curriculum, this review compared the theory of Smith with other related literature on this subject. This paper was intended to 1) compare the theory of Smith on curriculum theory and planning to other literature; 2) evaluate the theory of Smith on curriculum theory and planning based on related literature; and 3) make recommendations for educational policymakers on how the curriculum should be created and implemented. To achieve this comparative literature review was initiated. Andrews and Goodson (1980) argued that a comparative literature review of a curriculum approach and theory is an assessment that looks at how two or more theories or approaches address a particular topic, how they are different, and how well each approach works in practice. Shahjahan, Estera, Surla, and Edwards (2020) highlighted that it involves examining the purpose, goals, methods, values, and outcomes of the theories or approaches being compared. By critically evaluating similarities and differences between theories and their application in specific contexts, this type of review allows academics and educators to gain insights into the value of competing concepts as well as identify areas for improvement or further investigation.

2. Theoretical basis

This comparative literature review is focused on the curriculum development theory and practice by Mark K. Smith. In his article, Smith (2000) examines the interpretation of curriculum and delves into the *distinct* approaches to curriculum theory and practice in combination with its historical roots. He began by synthesizing his theory which led to the four ways of approaching curriculum theory and practice: (1) curriculum as a body of knowledge to be transmitted, (2) curriculum as product, (3) curriculum as a process, and (4) curriculum as praxis.

Smith discusses curriculum as a collection of knowledge that needs to be taught and links it to the syllabus, which indicates the content and sequence of topics. He suggests that those who adhere to this idea will likely have narrow instructional plans since they only consider the material they wish to impart. Smith investigates the roles of teachers, students, and knowledge in curriculum as a process. He highlights the major components of Stenhouse's curriculum concept with a cooking recipe analogy. Additionally, Smith emphasizes that curriculum is not the activity itself but instead is a way to practice educational proposals. He draws a distinction between process and product such as model, results, learning approaches, and participants. He takes into account related issues including lack of uniformity in delivery, forgetting about context, and narrow behavioral results.

According to Smith, curriculum as praxis is an offshoot of the practical approach. He believes that it represents a combination of action and reflection that seeks to liberate the human spirit. Through this approach, attention is paid to collective practices, pursuit of meaningful commitment, and exploration with peers. No matter what way the curriculum is implemented, it must be contextualized. A curriculum is also incredibly important in creating a line between formal and informal education. Formal learning uses a methodical plan while non-formal teaching does not. Nevertheless, professors should not assume that only formal education obtains it all since Smith remarked, "Education is something more than schooling".

These four ways of approaching the curriculum by Smith (2000) were the ones compared to other literatures. For instance, in the curriculum as praxis, Smith argued that the flow of the curriculum should foster the practical side of the content. This research purported to evaluate if these pillars of Smith's theory hold true in another published research. This allowed the researcher to come up with the conclusion and state several recommendations.

3. Methodology

This paper followed the design of a comparative literature review. A comparative literature review is an examination of two or more works, including books, films, or other items from a critical perspective (Basurto & Speer, 2012). They mentioned that this requires the author to critically evaluate each work by comparing and contrasting their merits, limitations, and/or strengths against others in the same category. The review should provide a balanced evaluation of the works based on how well they meet certain criteria. Additionally, it should consider how well each work contributes to our understanding of its particular topic or field. Ultimately, the goal of any comparative literature review is to provide an in-depth analysis that will help readers make informed decisions about which works are most likely to best suit their needs (Vallberg Roth, 2014).

The main points of the comparative literature review were coming from the four ways of approaching the curriculum theory and practice by Smith (2000). Hence, the articles used in this comparative literature review were Mark K. Smith's Curriculum Theory and Practice and related articles from the web. The article of Smith was read thoroughly and reread afterward to extract the relevant information and come up with the parameters of comparison. These parameters of comparison were curriculum as a body of knowledge to be transmitted, curriculum as a product, curriculum as a process, and curriculum as praxis. These parameters were compared to the related literature.

Furthermore, the related articles were identified through searches from article depository websites like Google Scholar, ProQuest, Emerald, Springer, SAGE, and ERIC. Only those full articles were used and written in the English language. The search options were "Curriculum theory", "Approaches to Curriculum Revision", "Curriculum as product", "Curriculum as process", "Curriculum as praxis", and "Curriculum as transmission of knowledge". Boolean operators like "AND" and mathematical operator like "+" were used to sort out directly the articles. Of all the articles that are popping out, only those that are originally written were used that are in English language.

When the articles were already available, they were extensively and comprehensively read until such time that a pertinent comparison was made. In total there were 15 articles that were part of this comparative literature review.

4. Result and discussion

The study results must be clear and concise. Use an appendix or additional documentation if needed.

4.1. Curriculum as a body of knowledge to be transmitted

The curriculum serves as a body of knowledge to be transmitted, meaning that it serves as a source of collective knowledge, which is passed down from one generation to the next. This body of knowledge is made up of facts, skills, and beliefs, which are used to impart key understandings that can then be applied in the wider world. In education, Shkedi (2009) argued

that curriculum guides what will be taught in the classroom and creates pathways for students to better comprehend the material being taught. It also outlines key objectives that need to be achieved in order for a student to progress through the educational system (Celik, 2011).

Ultimately, the curriculum serves as an important resource for providing meaningful instruction in any discipline or field. Without it, teaching would lack direction and clarity, instead becoming chaotic and unfocused (Blumberg, 2009). Furthermore, students would lack the guidance needed to develop their understanding of any given subject or topic area. For example, imagine trying to learn mathematics without a defined syllabus - it would be extremely challenging.

Smith (2000) tried to explain the difference between curriculum and syllabus. He said the syllabus is a list of topics and contents of lectures, while the curriculum is the theory or philosophy behind the syllabus. It encompasses the logical sequence of topics and how teachers will deliver the knowledge in the syllabus. Galstyan (2020) agrees with this difference. She pointed out that curriculum is an expansive notion incorporating philosophical, social, and organizational components when it comes to formulating an educational agenda while syllabus more closely pertains to a subpart of the curriculum that outlines exactly what topics will be taught in a course.

However, Darmawati (2022) argued that the syllabus could contain the rationale and how the topics were selected and organized. Along with this thought, Smith (2000) claimed that teachers are confused about syllabus and curriculum, and they equate the same meaning to these two documents. The study of Musingafi, Mhute, Zebon, and Kaseke (2015) found that teachers and students have difficulty in differentiating syllabus and curriculum. They concluded that this illustrated that teachers have not been given sufficient preparation, instruction, direction, and assistance in their roles, although teachers are essential to efficient education.

4.2. Curriculum as a product

Curriculum as a product refers to the body of knowledge a student is expected to master in an educational setting. It generally includes topics and skills that are essential for a student's success, such as reading, math, science, and social studies (Smith, 2000). The curriculum is developed by school districts and states, educators in the classroom, and organizations working with schools or education programs.

The design of a successful curriculum doesn't happen overnight; it requires careful planning, research, and analysis. When developing a curriculum product, there are needs that must be addressed. These activities focus on mapping out goals and objectives for the students based on their age level and learning ability. Goals should also align with any state-mandated standards or assessment tools being used. Furthermore, Shkedi (2009) cited that educators must also consider how content will be taught in order to engage learners and create meaningful learning experiences for each student. Additionally, educators must consider how materials will be selected, resources accessed, and technologies utilized to support learning objectives (Richards, 2013). With these factors in mind, the curriculum designer can then create engaging instructional materials that adhere to applicable standards while motivating students to do their best.

Smith (2000) highlighted problems with programmed schemes like assessing the learning objectives, the methods used by teachers in reality, and unexpected results. The practice of assessing the students with behavioral objectives and its results is truly prone to human error plus conflict of interest. For example, performance and projects are highly subjective, and to measure it objectively, a rubric is used. Even though a rubric is used, there are times that teachers are

measuring the performance overly or poorly, or an additional criterion is utilized. Mozaffari (2013) agreed that rubric endures the conundrum of subjectivity and resource exhaustion, and the components of rubric have nothing to do with creativity or are too difficult to assess. Schenck and Daly (2012) added that using ambiguous and imprecise criteria in the rubric to distinguish what a good performance is highlights a lack of comprehension regarding what makes up a good performance.

The method of how teachers may meet the objectives is another issue, as Smith (2000) explained. There are situations in which teachers are overworking the objectives or underperforming the objectives. This can suggest that teachers lack skills in properly using the learning objectives and can have an effect on how they measure the performance or product of the students. For instance, how to use properly the verbs “determine” and “measure” or the simple “define” and “state”. As Chodidjah (2012) said, a curriculum can be relatively novel to many educators, and they have very little knowledge on how to apply it in their teaching, and this resulted in problems when it came to deciding on goals for their lesson plan. Hamroev (2019) agreed on the same argument by which in his study found that teachers are aware that they are up against obstacles like the incapability to define the objectives of the curriculum. There are also issues of not completing the objectives of the curriculum because of its length and depth. Smith mentioned class interaction that goes beyond the objectives. This can be an extension of the lesson but this can eat the time too much and lead to the teacher not completing the curriculum.

Moreover, Smith (2000) highlighted what alternatives we have. Well, there is no alternative as far as this paper is concerned. The only way to measure students’ success in the classroom is through learning objectives and performance criteria for teachers. Although, this paper does not recognize that student achievement is a total reflection of the teacher’s performance because there are lots of factors affecting the academic achievement of the students. Wenglinsky (2002) argued that when teachers’ classroom methods are added to other teacher quality, the impact is equivalent in magnitude to that of the students’ backgrounds, indicating that educators can have a similar level of effect on student accomplishment as the learners themselves. Akiri (2013) added that there is an indication that effective teachers produced high-performing students.

This paper agrees that teacher’s performance can play a direct role in student academic performance by providing consistent and effective instruction, fostering an environment conducive to learning, and providing feedback that motivates students to do their best work. However, there are other factors, such as student motivation and home life, that also influence student academic performance which can affect the relationship between teacher performance and student achievement (Pacala, 2019). Therefore, it is difficult to draw a definitive conclusion on whether or not student academic performance reflects teacher performance. Occasionally, instructors lack sufficient knowledge of what the goals of their students and courses are (Zohrabi, 2008). What should be done is for the school and the whole of the academic community should work together in solving this issue. Teachers should be provided with training on the key elements of the curriculum that pertain to the measurement of the learning objectives. Teachers should be clear on this aspect because it can affect the learning of the students.

4.3. Curriculum as a process

Curriculum as a process is when the curriculum is seen as an ongoing cycle of planning, developing, delivering, and evaluating resources that take into account the goals of learners, teachers, and schools. Smith (2000) viewed that curriculum is not just a set of courses or a list of

activities but rather something that involves ongoing processes and interactions between all stakeholders. This outlook stresses the importance of continuous dialogue between learners, teachers, schools, and other stakeholders in order to ensure that the curriculum meets their needs (De Villiers, 2010). It also emphasizes the need for collaboration among those stakeholders in order to create effective curricular materials that promote learning. The focus on curriculum as a process provides an opportunity for communities to think more deeply about how knowledge can be used to positively shape individuals' lives.

Smith (2000) discussed the alternative to the current state of curriculum that focuses on the learning objectives. The educational process known as curriculum is more comprehensive than just learning objectives. Heitmann (2005) supported Smith he said that curriculum is ultimately the way in which education is designed, delivered, and evaluated with the goal of helping learners reach certain specific goals. Heitmann (2005) emphasized that learning is a social process rather than an individual one by involving students, teachers, parents, and administrators in the planning and assessment of knowledge acquired. It addresses all aspects of the education system, including classroom instruction and assessment styles, curriculum design and content standards, instructional policies and practices, school environment and culture, professional development opportunities for staff members, communication patterns between stakeholders, and much more (Wenglinsky, 2002).

The problem with the idea of the curriculum as a process is a lack of uniformity in delivery, forgetting about context, and narrow behavioral results (Smith, 2000). Moore, Jensen, and Hatch (2003) agree with this idea. They floated that the imposition of prescribed standards often demoralizes exemplary teachers, leaves numerous students in precarious circumstances, fails to include crucial science principles (for instance, evolution is often left out of state requirements), and does not lead to enriching experiences for either educators or learners. Rigid standards may limit student creativity and exploration or exclude certain groups or individuals who are not able to meet certain requirements (Twigg & Yates, 2019). However, this paper thinks otherwise; since the students of every school are different from one another, the approach to the curriculum is varied as well, and how they will be measured is varied. This would be problematic since there is no longer a standard, and every school has its own standard of achievement, which can never be the same for everyone. Hamroev (2019) argued that having standards can help ensure that students have a consistent level of educational quality and that they have access to resources necessary for success, while Basurto and Speer (2012) added standards that allowed for students to be held accountable for their performance.

Ultimately, whether it is curriculum as a product or process, data-based decisions about curriculum selection should be followed. This can help ensure students are receiving the best education possible based on current research regarding teaching methods and the development level of learners of various ages. If a country or school pursues the framework of curriculum as a process, they must ensure that the gaps mentioned by Smith (2000) are filled or else it is again a fragmented one.

4.4. Curriculum as a praxis

Curriculum as praxis is an educational approach that emphasizes meaningful action, social change, and a critical examination of societal power structures. As Smith (2000) contented, this approach views the classroom as both a space to learn from and an opportunity to actively engage in knowledge production. In terms of implementation, curriculum as praxis has a focus on

connecting academics to real-world issues through active collaboration among all stakeholders (teachers, administrators, and even students), applying theories to practice in school settings, using participatory strategies such as role play and simulations and problem-based learning techniques (Arnold & Mundy, 2020).

Curriculum as praxis works by connecting theory to practice. Darling-Hammond, Flook, Cook-Harvey, Barron, and Osher (2020) highlighted that this model emphasizes the need for educators to think critically about what they are doing in the classroom, strengthen real-life connections between concepts and experiences, and understand the power dynamics that can be in play in different educational environments. By having an approach that moves beyond simply delivering content or attempting to teach skills in isolation, practitioners are able to better plan situations and tasks that ensure students get a meaningful learning experience. Curriculum as praxis emphasizes an ongoing process of review and refinement of curricular materials with an understanding that educational practices should take into account the individual context, values, and goals of each learner (Chiu & Chai, 2020). This can include assessing how different texts, activities, lesson plans, resources, technologies, and so on work together in order to create scalability while also maintaining a level of relevance specific to individuals or groups.

This paper agrees with the literature. Indeed, the curriculum should be a praxis. It can foster an environment of collaboration, critical thinking, and problem-solving by applying action-based learning that actively engages students in their education. Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) argued that praxis is not only an effective way of learning but also allows students to learn through community involvement so they can take what they learn in the classroom and put it immediately into practice. Palupi (2018) reasoned that this type of experiential learning could help better shape the student's academic journey as well as give them a hands-on approach to problem-solving and understanding different perspectives, making them more well-rounded adults.

How should curriculum as praxis be lay-outed in the classroom? There should be a way in to promote an understanding of learning as a deeply participatory process, in which the student is actively engaging with and constructing knowledge through their experiences. Chiu and Chai (2020) added that schools should be developing curricula that integrate multiple disciplines, allowing students to draw on multiple sources of knowledge to develop their own unique perspectives and incorporating approaches to teaching that increase access to education while ensuring equity of opportunity regardless of gender, race, social class or any other form of identity or difference. Finally, schools must see to it that they developing strategies for promoting social justice by integrating it into the curriculum, addressing issues related to global inequalities, power dynamics, and oppression in educational contexts as well as in wider society (Spitzman & Balconi, 2019).

4.4. Discussion

The debate over whether the curriculum should be viewed as a product, process, or praxis is an ongoing one. Much of the focus for educators is on providing students with content knowledge and skills in order to ensure their success in academic contexts, both now and in the future. While there are clear benefits to taking each of these perspectives, they also come with some trade-offs that must be considered when debating how best to approach curriculum design.

Product-focused approaches to curriculum design typically emphasize the development of textbooks or other prescribed materials that can serve as resources for teachers and students within the classroom (Richards, 2013). These products are designed to provide guidance in terms of what

topics should be covered and how they should be covered while giving teachers and students a well-defined structure through which learning can occur. Mozaffari (2013) agreed that this approach would create a uniform set of standards that can be used across multiple grades or classrooms in order to deliver consistent results when it comes to student learning outcomes.

Process-based approaches often involve focusing on specific methods or techniques used throughout the educational process. Heitmann (2005) cited that as opposed to product approaches, this could involve looking at activities such as problem-solving, inquiry-based learning, or project-based learning, which may not have predetermined goals but instead aim at teaching students how to think more critically about different issues. Unlike products where the end result is generally predetermined by the authors of material, with processes, there is room for discovery within classroom contexts that allow teachers and learners alike to value experimentation and collaboration along new paths of exploration.

Praxis-oriented curricula focus on both theory and practice in terms of educating learners. Palupi (2018) argued that this perspective encourages teaching content within meaningful contexts that link the subject matter being studied with broader impacts connected directly back to society at large. Here emphasis ought not only be placed upon imparting knowledge, but developing skills related directly to navigating everyday practical realities, particularly through connecting individuals' actions directly back into larger systems at play around them (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Ultimately, neither view should necessarily take precedence entirely over all others when creating educational curricula because there are advantages and disadvantages associated with each viewpoint representing a compromise between delivering content-specific objectives while maintaining personal connection within teaching/learning experiences taught during class time. With that said, it is certainly easier from a logistical perspective to develop curricula from primarily product-focused views given the limited time frames allotted for coursework; however, Chiu (2021) and Darmawati (2022) both believed that developing an eclectic approach blending aspects from products processes and praxis perspectives interacting with one another can ultimately yield better results in accordance with desired student outcomes over the long term.

5. Conclusions & recommendations

A curriculum can be a product, process, or praxis. When seen as a product, the curriculum is composed of documents and activities created and/or implemented by educational professionals to facilitate learning for students. As a process, curriculum development involves all facets of how it is crafted and implemented throughout the learning experience, such as teacher-learner relationships, assessment methods, and structures of content presented in the classroom. Finally, when viewed as a praxis, curriculum can be a site where theory meets practice-specifically through dialogue and reflection among those who create and experience the nature of learning within it.

In conclusion, curriculum can be conceived in multiple ways depending on the context and materials being examined. The process by which it is designed is just as important as the final product being implemented to foster learning outcomes in students. Furthermore, there needs to be an ongoing feedback loop between practitioners engaging with curriculum development in order to ensure that real improvement takes place along the way. In this modern world, this paper promotes that curriculum should be praxis. A connection between practice and theory is needed. The Praxis approach to curriculum offers a unique pathway from educational resources to real-

world outcomes that enhances student engagement with their learning outcomes and promotes lasting knowledge acquisition.

This review recommends the use of the principle of context in curriculum planning and revision. It is important that the activities are designed to actively engage learners while helping build their context knowledge. It is important for a curriculum to provide resources and instructional strategies that are accessible to different learning styles in order to meet the needs of all students. Finally, an effective curriculum should ensure opportunities for deeper levels of learning and allow integration of technology when appropriate. The curriculum should emphasize critical thinking skills and challenge traditional approaches by weaving innovative and creative practices into daily instruction.

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