THEORY AND PRACTICE OF CURRICULUM STUDIES

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Preface

This book was originally written as a series of lectures for the Theory and Practice of Education Course in the Diploma of Education, University of London Institute of Education. When we decided to cease giving the lectures and to rewrite them instead as weekly course reading material, we also decided to use them as a first draft of this book. Our thanks are therefore due to the students on the course who evaluated the chapters in their unrevised form.

All the contributors to the book are members of the Curriculum Studies Department at the Institute of Education except Terry Moore, who is senior lecturer in the Philosophy of Education Department, and Richard Pring, who left in January 1978 to become Professor of Education at Exeter University.

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Introduction

Why Curriculum Studies?

Denis Lawton

Schools, and teachers, are under attack from a variety of directions: Black Paper writers, and others, complain about lowering of standards; employers complain that school leavers are ill-prepared for the world of work; at the other extreme Illich (1971) and the de-schoolers suggest that schools do more harm than good. Many others might feel that schools should not be attacked but should be subject to close public scrutiny. The idea of 'accountability' in education has been under discussion since the early 1970s but was probably given a boost by such events as the William Tyndale inquiry of 1975–6 (see Auld, 1976). The Assessment of Performance Unit (APU) recently established by the Department of Education and Science is another expression of this concern about standards and accountability.

Teachers in England are often said to be much more 'free' than teachers in other parts of the world, particularly in their freedom to decide what to teach. There is no centrally imposed curriculum for schools. Clearly this kind of freedom carries with it great responsibilities: if teachers do their own curriculum planning, perhaps the public has a right to know how they make their decisions? But another interesting characteristic of teachers in England is that they appear to dislike 'theory' – they often claim to be down-to-earth classroom practitioners rather than theorists. There may be all kinds of explanations for this lack of theory (at least one writer has suggested that it is because most educational theory is bad theory!), but at times of crisis – financial or

ideological – teachers are likely to be asked to justify what they do in the classroom and it is difficult to see how this can be done without taking up a position involving some kind of educational theory. Everything that a teacher does in a classroom involves values, sets of assumptions, views about the nature of children and of knowledge – all of which are the basis of educational theory. It might be suggested that the average teacher's 'theory' is half-baked or naive, or oversimplified, or self-contradictory, but some kind of theory there must be. One purpose of this book is to help practising teachers to clarify their own theory and practice; it is not to impose on you the contributors' view of what education should be.

One difficulty with educational theory in the past has been the tendency to try to explain a very complex process of educational practice by means of oversimplified theoretical positions. In curriculum there are at least three popular theories or sets of assumptions held by teachers, sometimes referred to as the child-centred view of education, the subject-centred or knowledge-centred view, and the society-centred view, i.e. education justified in terms of the supposed needs of society. Many primary schools tend to be influenced by child-centred theories of various kinds; the grammar school curriculum has been said to be subject-centred rather than child-centred (one of the most common educational clichés is that whereas primary teachers teach children, secondary school teachers teach subjects; but it is difficult to see how anyone can teach without teaching something and someone). Secondary modern schools have in their turn sometimes been praised or blamed for being society-centred. One of the sources of confusion in comprehensive schools may be that teachers are not clear about whether their curriculum is subject-centred in the grammar school tradition, or society-centred in the secondary modern school tradition. Secondary teachers are only rarely accused of being child-centred.

However, none of these three 'theories' can on its own be a complete justification for a curriculum. If we try to justify a completely child-centred curriculum, we find ourselves in a very difficult situation. If teachers claim to plan a curriculum in terms of children's needs and interests it is difficult to see why teachers are necessary at all. Unless teachers are there to

stimulate interest, and create needs which the child ... aware of himself, then it is difficult to see why we should have teachers or schools. The teacher who has nothing to offer the child by way of knowledge or interesting experiences is not justifying his existence. Perhaps the best way to think of the role of the teacher during the primary or middle years is to think of the teacher as someone who makes demands on children that they would not make on themselves if the teacher were not there. In some senses, of course, we are all child-centred nowadays: we have moved away from the kind of situation where schools ignored children's interests, and simply imposed on them a rigid routine, but that is very different from suggesting that the whole of an educational programme can be based on allowing children to follow their own interests without any guidance at all. The child-centred view was a much-needed reaction against nineteenth-century inhumanity and authoritarianism in schools, but in some cases it has been mistakenly seen as a complete theory of education and curriculum. (This issue will be pursued further in chapter 2 by Richard Pring.)

The knowledge-centred curriculum also has something to offer but is not a complete answer. Whatever else education may be about, it is certainly concerned with the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next. But few would now suggest that that is the only concern of education, and few would suggest that the existing subject-dominated structure of many secondary schools is the right one. Philosophical discussions about the structure of knowledge may help to plan a curriculum in some respects, but to suggest that children must learn certain kinds of knowledge because they exist as separate and distinct forms is rather like saying we must climb Everest because it is there. Some people do not want to climb Everest, and some children seem to be unattracted by certain kinds of knowledge. If schools want to persuade pupils to embark on certain kinds of studies they must employ arguments about worthwhileness.

Finally there is the 'needs of society' or 'society-centred' kind of curriculum. Arguments here tend to suggest that the curriculum must be planned according to the changing nature of our society. The argument may be at a very naive level and suggest that because we have entered the Common Market

children should spend more of their time learning foreign languages (a very doubtful proposition); more sophisticated versions of this argument talk about the need for society to have more scientists and technologists and therefore that schools should concentrate more attention on science and mathematics. This argument, however, also breaks down under scrutiny if it is employed as the only justification for the curriculum. The two main arguments against it are, first, that we may not wish to educate individuals for society: we may be more interested in getting them to change society or at least modify certain aspects of it; there is an almost totalitarian flavour about an education system which unwittingly prepares individuals for society in much the same way as factories process raw materials into manufactured goods. The second argument against this kind of justification is that it begs the whole question about the nature of society. Society is a collection of the individual members of society, so we may ask 'who says that society needs more technicians and technologists?' The idea of society 'needing' something over and above the 'needs' of individual members is a very odd one.

Thus a comprehensive theory of curriculum planning would recognize the individual nature of the pupils, and also recognize the value of education in its own right. But if we are to plan a programme of compulsory activities we will have to take into consideration the three kinds of view expressed above, i.e. the child-centred, the knowledge-centred and the society-centred. Whilst each one of them is incomplete on its own, each one may have something to contribute to planning a curriculum as a whole. One way of looking at this kind of comprehensive curriculum planning has been described as the *situation-centred curriculum*, which is based on the idea that schools should be concerned with preparing the young for the world as it will be when they leave school, i.e. preparing them to cope with the kind of situations which they will encounter as adults. This does not, of course, cut out the value of some kinds of experiences in their own right, nor does it mean that children are simply processed to conform to an adult world – quite the opposite; this view of education usually assumes that children should be prepared to exert some influence over their environment rather than

be dominated by it. It suggests that one of the purposes of education is to develop a child's autonomy: he must learn to cope with the variety of situations which face him in society. In order to do this he must acquire different kinds of knowledge. Knowledge is in this context used in a very general sense, but it is quite clear that without knowledge a child cannot become autonomous but must remain dominated by other people and other things.

Thus neither philosophy, nor sociology, nor psychology, can on its own justify a curriculum or be used as the sole basis for curriculum planning. Figure 1, although still oversimplified, illustrates the complexity of the task.

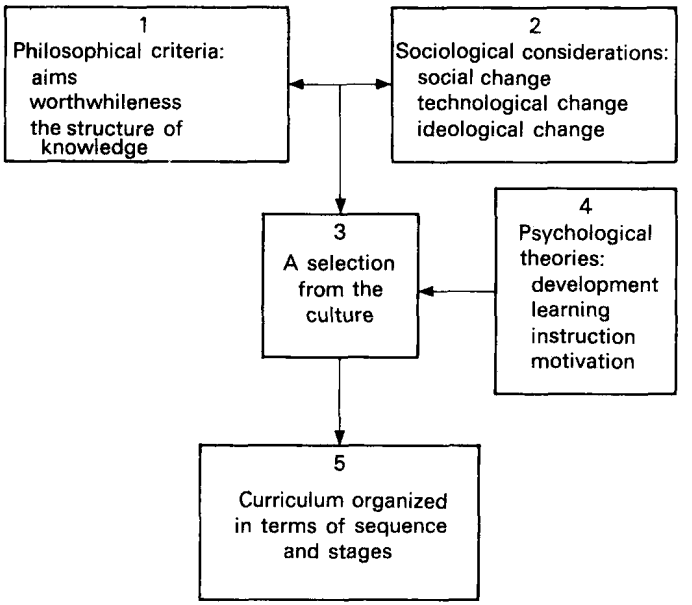

Figure 1

1 Philosophical criteria: all teachers have ideas about what is worthwhile, or the structure of knowledge, but most would benefit from rethinking these ideas systematically.

2 Teachers will also need to examine the relationship between the more permanent questions in box 1 and our society

now (box 2): in particular the fact that we are theoretically committed to the ideology of equality of opportunity in education.

3 The interplay between box 1 and box 2 will enable us to make some kind of ideal selection from the culture, e.g. that everyone should have some knowledge of mathematics, science, the humanities, etc.

4 At this stage we can consider the ideal solution in the light of psychological theories and practicalities. Piaget's stages of development could hardly be ignored; Bruner's spiral curriculum will help us to work out structure, sequence, etc.

5 We are now at the stage of organizing a curriculum in the practical terms of a time-table.

Each of these five stages involves many issues and problems which will be considered later in the book.

Further reading

Lawton (1973, chapter 1) discusses the idea of curriculum and the need to remove the gap between theory and practice. Also, Lawton (1973, pp. 153–5) examines R. S. Peters' views on 'Worthwhileness' which should also be read in Peters (1966, chapter 5).

Part One

Approaches Through the Disciplines

Chapter 1

The Nature of Educational Theory

Terry Moore

Educational theory has seldom been a popular topic of study. Student teachers, however interested they may be in the practice of education, have rarely been much enlivened by its theory. Educational theory has often been thought of as boring and in some hands it can be. It is sometimes thought of as vague, and sometimes unrealistic and irrelevant, which again it may be. It is often regarded as unnecessary, in that it is possible to be a good teacher without knowing anything about educational theory. And, it has sometimes been declared to be a non-subject; to have no substantial claim to be theory at all.

This chapter tries to put in a good word for educational theory, and to show its relevance to educational practice. To the charge that it is boring and vague we may retort by saying that it need not be, and that any such criticism should be levelled against those who teach it rather than against educational theory as such. To say that it is unrealistic or irrelevant is to fail to distinguish between good theories of education and bad ones. The charges that it is unnecessary or that educational theory doesn't amount to theory at all, are more substantial and need to be met in more detail.

We may take the second point first, and note to begin with the word 'theory' which can be understood in more than one way. Its most common meaning comes from its connection with science. Scientific theories are what most people have in mind when they think about theory at all. This is part of the trouble with educational theory. Many students, especially

those trained in the sciences, get exasperated with educational theory simply because it does not square with their notion of what a theory ought to be like, that is, a scientific theory. Now, a scientific theory, although its details may be complicated, is basically a simple matter. Scientific theories are *descriptive, explanatory* and *predictive* in function. They set out to tell us what the empirical world is like and what we may expect from it in the future – that gases will expand when heated, that unsupported objects will fall, and so on. An important characteristic of such theories is that they stand or fall simply by the way the empirical world happens to be. Scientists can *test* their theories, by seeing whether or not the world turns out according to their predictions. If it does, then their theories are confirmed; if not, then the theory in question has to be amended or perhaps rejected altogether. Scientists are always examining, observing, measuring the physical world, since their theories depend on this for their validation.

One of the objections to educational theory, and especially to the important educational theories of the past, is that they don't operate like scientific theories. The great historical educational theorists, Plato, Rousseau, Froebel, for example, didn't go about their work in the way that scientists go about theirs. They did little in the way of educational research; they carried out no systematic collection of evidence, and, moreover, their theories don't seem to be testable, or accountable, or disprovable in the way that scientific theories may be. So, it has been suggested, educational theory is a spurious sort of theory, one in which great thinkers can say more or less what they please and not be subject to the rigorous kind of checking-up that scientific theories have to undergo. Hence the view that, except for the bits of psychology and sociology contained in them, which may be subjected to scrutiny, educational theory doesn't amount to theory at all. At best it is admitted as theory only by a kind of intellectual courtesy. This charge needs to be looked at.

In doing so we must recognize that educational theory is somewhat different from theories in science. Scientific theory is primarily explanatory, descriptive and predictive in function. Educational theory, by contrast, belongs to another category, to what are called 'practical' theories.