

Re-Interpreting Curriculum Research: Images & Arguments

EDITORS: GEOFFREY MILBURN, IVOR F. GOODSON AND ROBERT J. CLARK



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Preface

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Readers will notice that footnotes are listed at the end of each chapter, while references are collected at the end of the book. Figures and Tables are numbered consecutively in the chapters to which they refer. Sections of the chapter by M. Grumet are reprinted, with permission, from *Bitter Milk: Women and Teaching* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), copyright (c) 1988 by The University of Massachusetts Press.

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Contents

| | |
|---|------------|
| Preface | <i>vii</i> |
| Introduction | 1 |
| <i>Robert J. Clark, Geoffrey Milburn and Ivor F. Goodson</i> | |
| Cultural Perspectives in Curriculum Research | 11 |
| ‘Chariots of Fire’: Etymologies, Epistemologies and the Emergence of Curriculum | 13 |
| <i>Ivor F. Goodson</i> | |
| Curriculum Policy and the Culture of Teaching | 26 |
| <i>Andy Hargreaves</i> | |
| Curricular Change and the ‘Red Readers’: History and Theory | 41 |
| <i>Bruce Curtis</i> | |
| State Formation and Classroom Practice: Once Again ‘On Moral Regulation’ | 64 |
| <i>Philip Corrigan</i> | |
| Methodological Alternatives in Curriculum Research | 85 |
| Feminism, and the Phenomenology of the Familiar | 87 |
| <i>Madeleine Grumet</i> | |
| The Persistence of Technical Rationality | 102 |
| <i>John Olson</i> | |
| Action Research: A Practice in Need of Theory? | 110 |
| <i>Catherine Beattie</i> | |
| Evaluation as Subversive Educational Activity | 121 |
| <i>Joel Weiss</i> | |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Teachers and their Curriculum-change Orientations <i>Dennis Thiessen</i> | 132 |
| An Integrative Function for Teachers' Biographies <i>Richard L. Butt</i> | 146 |
| How Much Life is there in Life History? <i>Geoffrey Milburn</i> | 160 |
| <i>References</i> | 169 |
| <i>Notes on Contributors</i> | 181 |
| <i>Index</i> | 183 |

Introduction

Robert Clark, Geoffrey Milburn and Ivor Goodson

The chapters in this book all originate in different ways from an acknowledgment of an obvious, yet often neglected, fact. In our reflections on schooling, and particularly in our studies of school curriculum, it is always as well to remind ourselves that we are dealing with social inventions and ongoing social constructions. Once we begin to investigate schooling and school knowledge as a social construction, the unproblematic ‘givenness’ of much curricular scholarship and educational policy begins to emerge in a clearer light.

Over twenty years ago, Williams (1961) put this central point very clearly in the context of the origins of the school curriculum in England and Wales.

An educational curriculum, as we have seen again and again in past periods, expresses a compromise between an inherited selection of interests and the emphasis of new interests. At varying points in history, even this compromise may be long delayed, and it will often be muddled. The fact about our present curriculum is that it was essentially created by the nineteenth century, following some eighteenth century models, and retaining elements of the medieval curriculum near its center. A case can be made for every item in it, yet its omissions are startling. (pp. 150–1)

As a social construction, then, the school curriculum involves a set of selections: the criteria for selection are various, ranging from the intellectual to the political. Williams’ essay focuses on the selection of *content*, but just as important is the selection of *form*. For instance, ‘proper’, ‘academic’ school knowledge in England is normally ‘abstract, highly literate, individualistic and unrelated to non-school knowledge’ (Young, 1971a, p. 38). This is a selection of *form*.

Tomkins (1986) made a similar argument about the origins of curriculum in Canada in the seventeenth century. In their curricular selections, the Jesuits 'established the tradition of highly centralized curriculum' that 'foreshadowed the "standards" or grades that later became a basic organizing principle for schools in all western systems of education' (Tomkins, 1986, pp. 12–3). Given such premises, scholars have begun to investigate the nature of the social construction of curriculum, and the relationship of the school curriculum to changing patterns of economic, social and political power. In their different ways the substantive and methodological pieces in this volume try to further this scholastic endeavour.

Such curricular investigations are linked to recent advances in the sociology of knowledge, in which the relationship between knowledge and control has been a principal feature. This was particularly the case in the 'new sociology of education' movement in the 1960s and 1970s. However, the world's changing aspirations of this intellectual genre plainly receded after the *annus mirabilis*, 1968. Whitty (1985), one of the early exponents, warns us that 'in the current conjuncture the school curriculum has itself become an important site of ideological struggle, even though it almost certainly lacks the overwhelming significance that "the new sociology of education" sometimes seemed to attribute to it' (p. 38). The collective view represented in this volume would, we think, share this sense of perspective and humility.

Given this perspective in curriculum studies, however, the task of the researcher assumes a different form. New problems and new questions demand new methodologies and new methods of reporting. Traditional methods of curriculum research related to management or teacher effectiveness are ill-adapted to exploring cultural or social relationships. Yet alternatives to these traditional forms are not easy to articulate and the usefulness of such alternatives is subject to dispute.

The authors in this book are interested in both the substantive questions and also in related methodological problems in the historical, sociological and cultural analyses of curriculum. In sum, they offer a series of images and arguments on the social interpretation of curricular research, intended to extend current debates on the nature and contribution of such a perspective.

The first part of this volume consists of four chapters grouped together under the title of 'Cultural Perspectives in Curriculum Research'. Although each chapter deals with a different subject, the four authors share a common purpose: to relate an important curricular question to the society of which it is a part. In particular, they try to show how changes in curriculum definitions, inservice education, reading texts for

students, and official guidelines are influenced by, or caused by, social and economic changes within political systems. Thus these authors offer interpretations of curricular phenomena, and insights into educational practice, that differ from those dominated by the assumptions of traditional curricular research.

The usefulness of such cultural analysis is illustrated by Goodson's analysis of the term 'curriculum'. His focus is on the original meaning of 'curriculum' and on the changes that have occurred in the period since it was first used. This search for an historical context for curriculum stands in stark contrast to contemporary usage in which the term is constricted (and restricted) to satisfy the needs of managers and administrators interested simply in technical matters. This purposeful constriction has served to disguise the origins of the term and to suppress previous meanings that were ascribed to 'curriculum' in earlier times.

It is these suppressed meanings—the 'etymology' and 'epistemology'—of 'curriculum' that Goodson examines in this volume. He points out that scholars have located the first uses of the term in Calvinist Europe in which new types of rulers were attempting to build a new theological and social order. From that period dates the identification of curriculum with new forms of approved knowledge for social control. Goodson also finds a link between the notion of the 'elect' and the implementation of a class-based curriculum that eventually led to the development of different forms of schooling for different classes of students in nineteenth-century England. His comments on the role of 'subjects' as school disciplines in this transformation add to our growing knowledge of the role of academic power groups in forming the contemporary curriculum. In sum, Goodson outlines an historical ground against which the figure of contemporary educational discourse takes on a new character. It is not a prospect that will give much solace to either curriculum theorists or practitioners.

Although Hargreaves examines a familiar problem, why teachers resist curricular change, his method of analysis and his final recommendations do not follow conventional patterns. He examines in some detail two widely adopted strategies for change and finds both of them wanting. Current attempts to transform teaching by transforming the ways in which teachers talk or think about their work—which he labels 'cultural interruption'—perish, he argues, on the conservatism of classroom practice, primarily because such reforms ignore the powerful conditions that sustain the culture of teaching. On the other hand, contemporary efforts to reform the curriculum through 'subject' renewal seem to reinforce rather than redesign existing structures. Consequently, Hargreaves uses the term 'structural reinforcement' to describe curricular

reforms in Britain and several other countries, reforms that seem to be waxing rather than waning in some of the latest pronouncements of government policy.

Hargreaves thus picks up some themes that Goodson identified as part of the social construction of curriculum. He argues for a view of curriculum change as a social process that encourages teachers to confront existing power relationships, especially those embedded in subject-specialist differentiations in schooling. His criticism of familiar patterns of curriculum renewal, and his recommendations for alternative procedures and practices, reflect his interest in examining curriculum as a socially constructed phenomenon.

The last two authors in this section examine examples of government-approved curriculum documents, on the one hand school textbooks in the nineteenth century, and on the other hand a recent government policy document on evaluation. They serve as two case studies in analyzing familiar documents to reveal the nature and purpose of state regulation in curriculum.

First, Curtis examines the change-over in schools in Canada West (now Ontario) from the Irish National Readers (in use from 1846) to the Canadian Series of Readers (the 'Red Readers') in 1866. Although both sets of readers, he argues, were concerned with the dissemination of official knowledge among school populations, the two sets part company on questions of content and pedagogy. The earlier set appears to be more heavily didactic and designed for direct instructional methods, while the later set includes more readings relevant to Canadian concerns and designed to be more pleasing to young learners. Curtis ascribes these changes to the changing nature of a frontier economy; in the earlier period perceived needs for establishing a firmly controlled provincial economic structure encouraged education officials to take a heavier hand in curriculum formation than was the case a generation later when the capitalist system was more certainly founded.

This issue of regulation of the school curriculum by state authorities is examined in a contemporary setting by the final author in the first part of the volume. Corrigan examines a recent Ontario policy document on education to locate its purpose and intent. He notes the ways in which the central authority uses its authority to relate the school curriculum to a particular vision of society. As a consequence, he argues that students will have no alternatives other than being socialized into a consumer society oriented to *the* information age. This document, in short, is a strategic example of the state using its power not only to control the curriculum, but to set a particular agenda for curriculum renewal and change. Rather than encourage schools to examine important issues, the

document works from a series of centrally generated givens to which the schools are required to correspond. Curriculum renewal, in consequence, is seen in purely administrative terms in which technical rationality is inevitably victorious.

The first four chapters, therefore, are examples of alternative forms of educational criticism. Rather than discuss such curricular terms as 'effectiveness' and 'impact', they attempt to relate developments within curricula to the cultural contexts of which schools are a part. Their points of departure are more historical and sociological than technical: their interests are in power relationships within the state, and in the pedagogical and curricular results of changes in those relationships. The chapters in the first section of this volume illustrate the force of this type of interpretation, and set the stage for the methodological studies that follow in the second section.

The contributors to the second part of this volume focus upon research methodologies related to the types of cultural analysis illustrated in the previous part. In research style, the studies are qualitative and critical rather than quantitative, and in methodological range, they include phenomenological and autobiographical analyses, as well as field work and life-history approaches. Despite this diversity, however, common theoretical strands are woven throughout the section. The authors, for example, seek to understand the meaning of events and the interactions of teachers and administrators from these persons' points of view in particular curricular settings. In effect, curricular phenomena are construed as socially constructed in particular contexts; in this regard, the contributors are sensitive to theory emerging from the evidence being collected rather than being superimposed on the evidence. Their concern is identification of the ideological underpinnings of social and political relations located in their curricular studies.

The form and substance of the chapters vary. Some authors are reporting and analyzing a particular body of research evidence, others are critically reflecting about the methodology as well as the social and political meanings attached to different types of qualitative enquiry. Some couch their accounts in narrative form, others rely upon more categorical frameworks to structure their studies. Some more self-consciously disclose the subjectivity that they bring to their investigations, others tend to distance themselves in more formal, analytical fashion. Whatever the variety that exists, all suggest new agendas for researchers in the field of curriculum studies.

Grumet's narrative style provides an example of the extent to which forms of qualitative research have departed from empirical-analytical enquiry. In keeping with her autobiographical approach, she begins by

narrating her own growing disenchantment with, and defection from, mainstream social science methodology in favour of a phenomenological perspective. In similar fashion, she ascribes at least a part of her interest in feminism to her awareness of the disregard and denigration of women, even among 'the so-called left in curriculum theory'. Her phenomenological and feminist interests come together in her studies of the significance of reproduction in both teaching and accounts of teaching. In her interpretation of three autobiographical narratives written by a female teacher, Grumet illustrates her focus on the phenomenology and psychoanalytic account of gender in order to better understand how the private and public lives of women are intertwined in their work. The teacher's accounts are vivid in their descriptive detail of personal experiences and replete with reflective musings.

Grumet's analysis of the texts reveal her interpretive, methodological stance. In each autobiographical account she detects an emergent pervasive meaning of the whole text; moreover, she teases out relationships that reveal continuities and discontinuities among the three excerpts. Her interpretation is strengthened by psychoanalytical insights, metaphoric analyses and etymological explanations. In particular, she combines phenomenological and feminist perspectives in keeping with the basic argument at the beginning of her chapter.

Olson, on the other hand, is interested in exploring reasons for the persistent dominance of technical rational ideology in shaping the professional discourse and practices of educational administrators and teachers. The durability of this stance, he maintains, is rooted in administrators' needs to legitimate their work, which is fraught with ambiguity and value conflicts, and constantly subject to public scrutiny. In this regard, he contends that scientific management theories, with their promise of enhanced efficiency and accountability in bureaucratic environments outside of the field of education, prove irresistible as legitimating principles for school administrators and teachers. While this tendency to project an image of the ordered management of change may win some degree of public acceptance and hence reduce career anxieties, he argues that it falsely obviates the need to confront important value issues that permeate curricular phenomena. Olson has no immediate remedy for the situation, but he does suggest that a more self-conscious awareness by educators of their penchant for rationalizing reputational anxieties would lead to a more realistic appraisal of means-ends issues central to curriculum deliberation.

In a similar fashion, Beattie analyzes the extent to which action research, a controversial approach to curricular research, should and can

be theoretically justified. She admits that proponents of this form of research traditionally claim a context-dependent, inextricable relationship between theory and practice that defies the building of generalizable propositions. Nevertheless, she points to both logical and political reasons for initiating theory construction. Logically, for example, if action research is to be understood and rationally assessed, then meta-theoretical principles seem to be a prerequisite. Likewise, in a political sense, if this form of research is to gain academic legitimacy, then the devising of theoretical principles is essential.

Next, in dialectical fashion, Beattie presents counter arguments. She claims, for example, that the uniqueness of personal, practical knowledge, and the danger of appropriating meta-theory developed independently of practice, discount a role for traditional social scientific propositions. In a related argument, she asserts that the use of testable propositions would subvert action researchers' aim to enhance practitioners' control and understanding of curricular phenomena. Beattie ends her analysis with a seemingly intractable challenge for academic theorists: to explain how a research style predicated upon strengthening teacher control and empowerment can be sustained in bureaucratic structures in which teachers enjoy very little power.

Like Beattie, Weiss raises perplexing questions about the relationship between theory and practice, but his focus is upon evaluation. He aspires to a political and theoretical realignment of program evaluation to increase its educational potential. This impetus is needed, he contends, because the findings of professional evaluators have been largely ineffectual, for reasons ranging from bureaucratic inertia to evaluators' failure to reflect critically about their enterprise. It is a damning indictment. On a more promising note, Weiss detects harbingers of a renewed focus upon the educative potential of evaluation emanating from a shift toward qualitative research in education, reinforced, in particular, by questions of agency associated with action research, and conceptions of emancipation raised by critical theory.

In advancing his argument to lend educative import to evaluative endeavours, Weiss re-casts the role of evaluation within the context of curricular principals: the teacher (evaluator), evaluative paraphernalia and interactions (curriculum materials), the audience (student) and evaluative conditions and context (media). This culminates in his delineation of an educational agenda for evaluators. The policy imperatives he identifies include a call for more deliberate self-reflection by evaluators about their current methodologies and ideological predispositions. He also sees a need for bridging professional boundaries and seeking greater collaboration

with other academic colleagues in the field of curriculum studies. In sum, Weiss envisions a complete reappraisal of typical conceptions of evaluation and their application in curricular settings.

In the following chapter, Thiessen reports on his research designed to identify curriculum-change orientations that emerged from interviews of selected Ontario teachers and administrators. The interviewees were asked to provide a retrospective view of curriculum change as it pertained to the development and implementation of a curriculum guideline for the study of English.

Thiessen illustrates his research strategy by providing excerpts from his interview transcripts, followed by his interpretive analysis of the comments of two groups of teachers working for the same board of education. Initially, he identifies commonalities that emerge in establishing the meaning of curriculum and curriculum change, the role of the teacher and the indication of important value positions on the part of the interviewees. When he turns next to assess the views of particular individuals, significant variations in meaning and emphasis become apparent.

Thiessen labels the two dominant stances he identifies as a 'teacher-centered-adaptation orientation', and a 'professional-renewal orientation'. He explains that those who espouse the former view are willing to adjust, but not significantly alter their practices; whereas the latter are more open to change, depending upon collaborative discussion and critical debate about what they consider to be personally and socially important in the classroom. Apart from these two positions, he briefly notes two additional orientations that characterized interviewees working for four different school boards included in his study: a 'structured-direction', top-down, technical-management position, and a 'strategic-influence orientation' which attributes the shaping of curriculum change to key educators in a particular school jurisdiction. *In toto*, Thiessen's research appears to detect conceptions of curriculum change that cannot be readily accommodated within existing models and perspectives in this field.

Butt amplifies the importance of the personal and biographical aspects of teachers' knowledge raised in Thiessen's study, and in the theme of life histories which courses its way through the various chapters of this volume. What is distinctive about Butt's contribution is his deliberate description and reflective analysis of his graduate-education course emphasizing autobiographical accounts that reveal aspects of the personal and experiential nature of teaching.

Butt describes his course, including assignments intended to encourage students to construct different forms of documentation such as daily journals or tapes of lessons with reflective concern for emergent

themes and patterns. He stresses that careful modelling and mutual participation by the instructor are essential to encourage a co-operative, non-judgmental relationship among students, both to promote understanding of classroom phenomena, and to negotiate comfortable levels of personal disclosure. It would appear to require a delicate *modus operandi* by an instructor with heightened personal and ethical sensitivities.

Butt's justification for his course centers upon the need to assist teachers to understand the sources and nature of their personal, practical, knowledge. In turn, he hopes that the generation and status enhancement of more authentic professional knowledge will enrich scholarly enquiry in the field of curriculum studies. In the context of a collaborative, autobiographical enterprise of this nature, he argues that the multiple functions of teaching, learning, professional development and research can be integrated for the personal and academic benefit of both the students and the instructor. In particular, Butt contends that this type of study is particularly conducive to research and professional development. In this regard, it supplants the outsider-insider, theory-practice dichotomies of technical-rational approaches with a form of investigation that enhances teachers' understanding, and potentially, their control of their future professional growth and study. Probably the most significant long-term value of the graduate-course approach, however, is the collegiate nature of relationships between professor and students as co-learners and co-researchers.

In the final chapter in this section, Milburn departs from the preceding contributors' advocacy of different forms of qualitative or ethnographic research by offering caveats about theoretical and applied aspects of life-history research. Using a particular case study, he begins by questioning the meaning of the term 'life history', and suggests that conventional definitions betray ambivalently uncomfortable attempts to straddle, on one hand, humanistic, historical biographies and, on the other hand, social scientific studies of collectivities. To illustrate this lack of consensus about a clear investigative focus, he cites a bewildering array of terminology in a variety of authors.

Next, the data underpinning life-history accounts is subjected to scrutiny. In essence, Milburn advises caution in investing credence in generalizations scantily supported by a quotation or series of quotations excerpted from field notes. The difficulties are carefully delineated: the frailty of subjects' recollections, the potential distortion of the meaning of subjects' spoken words in the editing of transcripts, and the denial of corroboration stemming from the anonymity necessarily accorded to the subjects. Milburn also attests to being unsettled by the dominant sociological categories that characterize life-history research, despite claims

to the contrary. In this regard, he also contends that authors should prudently note the interpretive rather than objective quality of their findings produced by their social scientific methodology. In the end, he queries the appropriateness of reporting life-history research within the framework of traditional academic papers. While several of the contributors to this section admit to limitations in their research styles, Milburn's account at the end of the book reminds us of the complexity and difficulty of embarking upon alternative research endeavours in the field of curriculum studies.

In sum, then, this book contains a series of essays and case studies that re-interpret curriculum research from a particular perspective: the relationship of school curricula to the political and social systems of which they are part and product. The intellectual traditions from which the contributors draw are not those with which many curriculum designers and practitioners may be familiar; but they supply the background for a series of substantive and methodological investigations that approach familiar questions from a different perspective. The authors try to uncover some of the mystifications that cloud our understanding of the invention, selection and social construction of school curricula, and to debate some of the ways in which that uncovering may be accomplished by students and scholars.

Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that the studies in the following chapters offer images and arguments, not irrefutable propositions, provide opportunities for further research and debate, not final statements on basic questions facing curricular theorists at the present time, and prompt readers to reflect upon the issues under discussion, rather than suggest facile solutions to complex or intractable curricular problems.

Cultural Perspectives in Curriculum Research