Chapter 3: Understanding the Curriculum

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Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you will:

- Be able to identify the main stakeholders in the curriculum

- Understand the purpose of national/state curriculum documents

- Gain insights into the design and construction of the local curriculum

- Understand why the curriculum always changes

- Appreciate the importance of meeting student needs within curriculum design

Terms

<Curriculum = the planned learning in a school or other educational setting >

< Stakeholder = a person or persons, a group, an organisation or a government body with an interest in the content and/or the philosophical direction of the curriculum >

Introduction

The curriculum is crucial to every educational setting. At first glance the official curriculum, which usually comes packaged in a formidable array of official documents, might seem dry or boring but in reality it is a springboard to powerful and effective classroom teaching. Understanding the basic principles of curriculum design is an important first step, for a preservice teacher, towards making sense of curriculum documents and creating engaging units and lessons for children and young people. This chapter is limited to the discussion of a handful of key topics with a view to equipping you for further specialised reading at a later stage. These topics are: the curriculum stakeholders, national and state curricula, constructing local curricula at the level of the school and the classroom, understanding that the curriculum constantly changes, and examining student-centred approaches to curriculum design and construction.

Theoretical Framework

The term **curriculum**, with the plural form of "curricula" and the adjectival form of "curricular", is derived from Latin. It is easy to become mired in discussion and debate about meanings and definitions for curriculum but, in simplified form, this term refers to the course of study students undertake in a learning context. For instance, Marsh refers to curriculum as the "planned learnings" in a school (2004, p. 5). Yet, as this chapter shows, a broader definition of the curriculum not only includes the subject matter within each discipline, but also planned and unplanned learning outcomes due to complex interactions between teachers, students, local communities, various interest groups, the global society and digital technologies.

For hundreds of years schooling in Western countries was a privilege reserved for royalty, the very wealthy or aspiring monks. Schools barely existed, so most students had

private tutors. The classical curriculum – inherited from the Greek and Roman civilisations – consisted of the *Trivium* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric), the *Quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy), and for the most talented students, advanced studies in philosophy and theology at university. The advent of the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent rise of schooling for the masses during the nineteenth century led to a major rethink about the nature and purpose of the curriculum. In 1854 British philosopher Herbert Spencer asked, "What knowledge is of most worth?" (1896, p. 21). Ever since then, educators have engaged in on-going discussions and debate concerning the content and philosophical direction of the curriculum.

Modern curriculum theory often traces its roots back to American educator Ralph Tyler's (1949) rationale for curriculum design. Although Tyler believed individual student needs should be met, his curriculum rationale emphasised the primacy of subject matter and, more particularly, specific learning outcomes. His rationale became synonymous with educational policies in the USA during the latter half of the twentieth century because it suited perfectly the outcomes-focused politics of the Cold War where technical and military superiority over the Soviet Union was a national imperative. Many curriculum documents since that period have had a strong technical emphasis. Indeed, a common but naïve understanding of the curriculum is that it is synonymous with a syllabus – consisting of various levels and subject area divisions with carefully organised lists of subject matter pre-sorted into particular pigeonholes ready to be turned into classroom lessons. However, curriculum construction is much more than a technical exercise. At its best, classroom learning is a deep, profound and life-altering experience for children and young people but this outcome is highly unlikely when classroom pedagogy is informed by a technical, dull and uninspiring curriculum.

The primary goal of curriculum design at the level of the school community, therefore, should be the development of deep understandings about subject matter that are relevant and meaningful to children's and young people's lives (McKernan, 2008). Contemporary curriculum documents go well beyond merely categorising subject matter and nearly always include focused comment on a range of matters pertaining to effective learning and teaching but, as this chapter will show, anything that gains entry to the curriculum must first pass through a political process. As a result, the official curriculum is generally the result of extensive negotiation and careful compromise.

Stakeholders in the Curriculum

One key curricular concept is the **stakeholders**, the people who have vested interests in the content and direction of the curriculum. Curriculum stakeholders may include any or all of teachers, parents, principals, subject area experts, academics, businesses, religious and cultural representatives, politicians, members of the wider community and governments (Brady & Kennedy, 2010). Stakeholders all have slightly different interests, thus they use their power and status to try and obtain the kind of curriculum they want. For this reason curriculum is always political and involves an on-going struggle between competing interests.

Curriculum construction involves a balancing act because every curriculum stakeholder will have a slightly different answer to Spencer's question about the knowledge of most worth and then jockey for position to try to make sure the knowledge they most value finds its way into the curriculum. Schubert (1995) suggested that the combined influence of curriculum stakeholders usually results in tensions between three competing factors: (1) the needs of the individual student, (2) the demands of wider society, and (3) the vested interests of subject areas. Parents want to ensure the needs of their children are met. Employers are keen to ensure that students learn valuable knowledge that can be applied in the work place. Universities and other tertiary institutions generally want to ensure that the selection of

subject matter and set of learning skills in particular subject areas are thorough and rigorous. In addition, as society becomes increasingly reliant on sophisticated technologies, politicians and other leaders demand that the bundle of essential technical knowledge needed by the next generation to maintain and improve technologies is included in the curriculum.

A soundly constructed curriculum includes input from advocates who assume the role of curriculum stakeholders on behalf of children and young people. While in practice advocates are often teachers or parents or members of the local community, experts with specialised knowledge and understanding about the educational and developmental needs of children and young people are often in a position to represent children and young people more effectively and, therefore, have a greater impact on the curriculum. One example of an advocacy group is the Australian middle schooling movement which supports the reform of education for young adolescents (10-15 years old). Much of the focus and energy of the movement is expended trying to convince other curriculum stakeholders to recognise young people have specific developmental and educational needs (Middle Years of Schooling Association, 2008). Indeed, in recent years many Australian independent schools have acknowledged that middle schooling philosophy is effective and meets the needs of their students. As a result, several independent schools in Australia have reconfigured their traditional primary and secondary organisations to form junior, middle and senior schools (Dowden, 2012).

The following Applied Learning Experience shows that even a single but highly committed person can influence the curriculum that children and young people experience.

Applied Learning Experience 3.1: Making a difference as a community stakeholder
The story of cook and restaurateur Stephanie Alexander is a remarkable example of how a single curriculum stakeholder from the wider community can influence many schools.

Ten years ago Alexander realised she wanted to do her bit to help tackle the problem of children eating poorly and the related concern of burgeoning obesity within Australian society. Commencing a 'kitchen garden' program at Collingwood College in inner Melbourne, she believed that if children could discover and explore the natural world and enjoy the experience of growing, preparing and sharing fresh produce with their local community, she would be able to positively influence the next generation. A decade later, over 30,000 children, predominantly in Grades 3-6, have experienced the satisfaction connected to the holistic process of growing, cooking and eating fresh food. In the process, many have developed important life skills, learned about the principles of sustainability, and dramatically improved their eating habits. As educational philosopher John Dewey explained over a century ago, children in programs like this learn in a simple yet profound manner — 'by doing' (1900, p. 120). The not-for-profit Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation currently has a presence in hundreds of schools across Australia. It supports teachers by providing a range of relevant and interesting curriculum material catering to four different year levels with references to relevant curriculum documents. Thanks to one passionate curriculum stakeholder, along with enthusiastic support from classroom teachers, whole communities are being impacted and children's lives are changing for the better (Alexander, 2012).

1. In what ways has Stephanie Alexander been able to influence the curriculum?

National and State Curricula

The primary purpose of national and state curriculum documents is to officially mandate the subject matter that will be taught. In addition most documents include a range of other factors

that teachers and schools are expected to take into account when they construct school and classroom curricula.

At the national level curricula are often relatively broad in their scope. The Australian curriculum which is still under construction (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2011) provides direction to the Australian states and territories. It is guided by the 2008 Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (involving all the Australian state as signatories) which aims to promote "equity and excellence" in Australian schools and supports all young Australians to become "successful learners, confident and creative individuals, active and informed citizens" (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008, p. 8). In New Zealand (NZ), state schools are responsible for their own governance. Accordingly, the NZ curriculum document describes its principle function as setting "the direction for student learning" and providing "guidance to schools as they design and review their curricula" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 6).

In Australia and New Zealand political parties of every persuasion appear to be committed to developing and maintaining world-class education systems. For instance, both countries performed very well – significantly above the OECD average – in the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests for mathematics, science and reading. Nonetheless, data from international testing and national testing in both countries shows that children and young people in impoverished and/or isolated communities persistently underachieve. This indicates that in certain regions and localities in Australia and NZ there is a pressing need for expertly designed, custom-made curricula that will help alleviate difficult problems caused by poverty and/or remote location.

Sometimes the official curriculum may be incomplete, especially since curricula can be progressively published online over a period of time. For this reason when the local curriculum is designed, teachers and schools should be alert to the possibility that official curriculum documents may not fully address all relevant aspects of learning and teaching.

A useful trend in contemporary national and state curriculum documents is to show teachers and schools how curriculum construction should include attention to all aspects of learning and teaching, including classroom pedagogies that stretch children and young people and appropriate assessment that authentically measures growth and development of skills and understanding. The forward-looking Queensland curriculum framework, which places a particular emphasis on aligning curriculum construction with student learning, is worthy of close study in this regard (Department of Education Training and the Arts, 2008). The next Applied Learning Experience (3.2) highlights the importance of addressing developmental needs within the curriculum.

Applied Learning Experience 3.2: Addressing students' developmental needs
The NZ curriculum document mandates a requirement for teachers and school communities
to accommodate students' developmental needs (Ministry of Education, 2007). Although,
knowledge of children's and young people's developmental needs is generally assumed to be
part of teachers' professional knowledge, this is not always a safe assumption in the case of
teachers in the middle years (Dowden, 2012). The NZ document identifies three 'Learning
pathways' during the thirteen years of formal schooling. These are: "Learning in Years 1-6",
"Learning in Years 7-10", and "Learning in Years 11-13" (p. 41). The creation of these three
distinct pathways diverges from the traditional split between primary and secondary
schooling to more accurately reflect contemporary understandings about human development.
Accordingly, the curriculum document highlights the stage-specific developmental needs of
children, young adolescents, and older adolescents. In particular, the inclusion of the
Learning in Years 7-10 pathway, which straddles the last two primary and first two secondary
years, emphasises that young adolescents need a "responsive curriculum" with a "clear sense
of continuity and direction" as they negotiate transition (p. 41). The document goes on to
explain that "positive relationships with adults, opportunities to be involved in the
community, and authentic learning experiences … (are) particularly important" for young
people in Years 7-10 (p. 41). Indeed, research in middle schooling contexts in the USA shows
that young adolescents respond especially well to student-centred curriculum designs that
encourage them to explore real-life issues and make meaningful connections in social
contexts beyond the classroom (Beane, 2005).

1. What kinds of curriculum design might respond to the needs of young adolescents: in (a) a
primary school, and (b) a high school?

The Local Curriculum

Curriculum construction is a social and cultural process involving input from all the
curriculum stakeholders. Local curriculum is effective when it is contextualised to take into
account the culture of the surrounding community along with children's and young people's
personal interests and needs. In contrast, a one-size-fits-all curriculum design lifted from a
textbook or obtained from a commercial outlet is likely to alienate students because it is
unlikely acknowledge their particular cultural knowledge and understandings. When the local
curriculum fails to utilise relevant and meaningful contexts, students tend to become
disengaged and disruptive (Brady & Kennedy, 2010). This section discusses local curriculum
design in the school and the classroom.

The school curriculum
An effective school curriculum can do much to make schooling more meaningful and
relevant. For example, a school curriculum that focuses on shared values, caring for one
another and celebrating diversity may result in tangible outcomes such as a reduction in
levels of bullying and other unpleasant behaviours. The school curriculum also provides an
opportunity to align pedagogy and assessment. For instance, the potential of classroom
activities involving student collaboration at increasing levels of sophistication is unlikely to
be achieved unless the skill base of children and young people is developed over the long
term (Killen, 2009). The following Applied Learning Experience shows how a well thought-
out school curriculum can bring about a profound change in the social climate of a school and
improve students' learning outcomes.

Applied Learning Experience 3.3: A responsive school curriculum
The Clover Park community in the suburb of Otara in Auckland, New Zealand is a testimony to the power of a student-centred approach to the school curriculum. Clover Park Intermediate School (Years 7-8) opened in 1981 but within a decade was characterised by academic under-performance, violence and vandalism. Following the implementation of a new school curriculum that was underpinned by a commitment to the cultural backgrounds represented in the school community, the school experienced a remarkable turnaround that gained the attention of national media (Neville-Tisdall, 2002). The educational philosophy at Clover Park is based on an inclusive curriculum design where young people have a voice because the local curriculum is collaboratively constructed by teachers and students (Beane, 2005). The key principles in the school's curriculum are critical pedagogy, where young people learn to ask questions about the world around them, and *whanaungatanga,* a Māori term for social connection, where the idea of the extended family is applied to all aspects of school life. This local curriculum values and respects young people's personal and cultural knowledge, meets their learning needs, and equips them with a framework for making sense of their world. The Clover Park school community is poor compared to most other NZ communities but its curriculum continues to promote positive learning outcomes for many young people (Dowden, 2010).

1. Why do you think young people in this school community responded so positively to the new curriculum design?

The classroom curriculum
The classroom context is where teachers as curriculum stakeholders are able to have a major impact on curriculum construction. Teachers also often assume the curriculum stakeholder role of advocate for children and young people. Teachers become truly effective stakeholders in the classroom curriculum when they genuinely know children at the personal relationship level, know their communities, know about student diversity, and understand children and young people according to the principles of human development.

Ideally, construction of the classroom curriculum involves getting every curricular component perfectly organised and aligned. In real life, teaching practice is never perfect, but classroom planning is generally effective when the basic principles of curriculum planning are addressed. An effective approach to curriculum design is firstly, to check that each curricular component has been appropriately considered, and secondly, to ensure that the curricular components are logically aligned so that learning experiences are genuinely engaging for children and young people.

Change in the Curriculum is Guaranteed

Technology and change
During the second half the 20th century, Western societies experienced a change in the workplace that has had deep implications for curriculum design construction and brings into question the kind of schooling that society now needs. In the industrial revolution of the 19th and early 20th century, employers expected employees to have basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic along with virtues such as diligence, punctuality and obedience. A single industry would typically employ much of the workforce in a town or city and employees could be assured of a job until they retired.

In the globalised context of the 21st century, employers often assume that job-seekers have highly developed communication skills and expertise in the use of technology. Many other people are self employed and most people will have several jobs and accompanying

work descriptions before they retire. It is quite likely that the majority of children in school today will have job descriptions for kinds of work that haven't been invented yet. New workplace virtues include flexibility, independence, and the ability to problem-solve or question things.

As the advancement of technology accelerates, so does the need to change curriculum content concerned with technologies. Digital technology is both local and global in its reach and it is probably difficult to underestimate its profound impact in the classrooms of the near future. Although this sub-topic is new to education textbooks, many children in today's world already routinely harness the immense power of digital technology to enhance their learning because they are "digital natives", that is, they have been surrounded by digital technology their whole life, so they don't know any other reality (Prensky, 2001, p. 1).

Politics and change

The curriculum is always political because information is a key to accessing power. As such, the content of the curriculum is continually contested and, therefore, the curriculum frequently changes. At election time this may happen literally overnight.

US American critical theorist Michael Apple (1990) recast Spencer's question of "What knowledge is of the most worth?" to ask "Whose knowledge is most worth?" (p. vii). He explained that politics has a major influence on curriculum content, thus the subject matter that is accepted into official curriculum documents consists of carefully chosen high culture knowledge which reflects the politics of the dominant group. Apple's question implies that politics plays a decisive role in deciding whose knowledge is of most worth (and is therefore allowed to enter the curriculum) and whose knowledge is marginalised (and is therefore prevented from entering the curriculum).

Indeed, the curriculum often becomes a political 'football' and a convenient scapegoat for economic underperformance. For example, every so often the media fields calls for education to 'get back to basics' from critics who, harking back to the kind of education needed during the industrial revolution, often want more emphasis on reading, writing and arithmetic. Fullan (1993) explained that innovative change in education is nearly always resisted, thus one important aspect in the process of any curriculum design is to convince the curriculum stakeholders about the need for change.

A political consensus on education by the dominant political parties in a state or nation is a rare and wonderful thing. It provides stability and allows high quality and forward-looking curriculum to be constructed without having to accommodate extremist demands. Curriculum change will always remain a certainty but when the curriculum framework is underpinned by principles of good design rather than a political agenda, it is less subject to change.

Definitions for curriculum

It should be clear by now that a simple definition for the curriculum, such as the one supplied at the beginning of the chapter, does not fully capture the complexity of the social context. In reality, the struggle among the curriculum stakeholders to influence the design and construction of the curriculum is mediated by diverse political and economic pressures.

The curriculum is perceived and experienced differently by stakeholders. One outcome is that textbook writers often seem to be determined to invent new jargon. Preservice teachers should not be intimidated by this. Many terms involve putting an adjective in front of the word *curriculum* and have a straight-forward meaning. For instance, the *taught curriculum* refers to what is actually taught in school. Other similar terms include the *intended curriculum*, the *enacted curriculum*, the *assessed curriculum* and the *received curriculum*. Some terms are more complex with a specific meaning. For instance, the *hidden curriculum* refers to unintended learning outcomes that are usually associated with cultural norms (e.g. girls sitting back passively and allowing boys to perform hands-on investigations during science classes leading to the belief that science is not an appropriate subject or career choice for girls).

This section has shown that curriculum is always dynamic and changes in response to the changing demands of society. In addition, curriculum documents come and go, and curriculum jargon is invented and replaced.

Curriculum Designs that put Students first

Addressing diversity and inequality via a democratic curriculum

In Western democracies, educators, politicians and the public generally agree that the primary role of education is to prepare young people for active citizenship and productive work lives

(Tyler, 1988). The primary purpose of curriculum design and construction, therefore, is to enable educators to pass on skills and information from one generation to the next. When the official curriculum is highly prescriptive and restricts the freedom of teachers, this purpose is achieved in a manner where power flows in a 'top-down' direction. On the other hand, when the official curriculum is broad and encourages the development off a strong local curriculum, this purpose can be achieved in manner where power flows in a 'bottom-up' direction some of the time.

American philosopher John Dewey (1916) argued that democratic citizenship is a crucial life skill that should be developed and practiced within the school setting. A democratic approach to education accordingly argues that assuming society wants the next generation to be active and productive citizens, students need to be actively involved in the development and implementation of the classroom curriculum (Apple & Beane, 2007). The political nature of the democratic curriculum is that power is able to flow in a 'bottom-up' direction. This gives stakeholders in the local curriculum a greater measure of freedom and, assuming the wider school community is committed to democratic principles, it offers an effective way to address issues of diversity and inequality in the community.

It is always desirable from a moral and ethical standpoint to address poverty and minimise societal misery but, in addition, recent research shows that when these issues are addressed systematically, the whole society reaps a tangible reward. Specifically, aggregated international data measuring a wide range of social and economic indicators has shown that nations that minimise inequality do significantly better than other nations (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010).

Student-centred curriculum designs

A student-centred approach to curriculum construction often means that when children and young people search for coherence and understanding, subject area boundaries are often blurred. Indeed, big problems that matter to society but don't have simple solutions are better investigated through the lens of more than one subject area (Brady & Kennedy, 2010). Environmental controversies provide an interesting cross-curricular context for engaging adolescent learners. For instance, a proposed pulp mill in Tasmania provided a fascinating curricular context for rich learning in social education, science and economics (McLaine & Dowden, 2011).

Young adolescents respond especially well to being given a degree of responsibility and control over their learning. For example, the concept of negotiating the curriculum has been trialled in Australian contexts (Boomer, Lester, Onore, & Cook, 1992) and a student-centred democratic curriculum model, where teachers and students collaboratively construct the curriculum, is considered to be an exemplary approach to middle schooling (Dowden, 2007; Middle Years of Schooling Association, 2008).

Curricula for young children should be constructed thoughtfully to ensure that learning is a "joyful and meaningful experience" (Moravcik, Nolte, & Feeney, 2013, p. 6). Teachers in NZ have a long tradition of constructing child-centred curricula with the needs of young children in mind. In the 1950s Silvia Ashton-Warner developed an "organic" reading method with Māori children in a primary school in the Hawkes Bay region (1963, p. 27). She rejected the sterile Euro-centric reading resources of the day and, instead, helped children create their own readers using subject matter from their local community. More recently, New Zealand primary school teacher Chris Brough adapted Beane's (2005) democratic curriculum model to meet the particular needs of young children. She invited children in her classes in the Waikato and Bay of Plenty regions to construct classroom curricula around 'teachable moments'. Her classroom pedagogy and research has demonstrated that, as long as sufficient scaffolding is provided, young children can capably collaborate with their teacher to co-

construct a democratic child-centred curriculum that results in powerful learning outcomes (Brough, 2012).

Summary

This chapter has focused on helping you develop an understanding the curriculum. Our discussion has shed light on five key ideas. First, curriculum stakeholders shape and influence curriculum design and construction. Second, national and/or state curricula are official documents and mandate what should be taught in schools. Despite their official nature, curriculum documents do not necessarily provide a complete blueprint for successful learning and teaching. Third, the school and the classroom are important sites of curriculum design. An effective local curriculum can have a major impact on the success of a school community. Fourth, curricular change is guaranteed. The rapid growth of technologies and the constantly changing dynamics of politics ensure that the official curriculum will keep changing. Fifth, definitions for the curriculum are complex because every curriculum is mediated by the social context. Democratic and student-centred curriculum designs address diversity and inequality, and respond to children's and young people's developmental needs.

<u>Discussion Questions</u>

1. Reflect on your personal experience as a high school or college student. Consider how the stakeholders in the curriculum used their influence and power.

2. Describe an instance where an individual curriculum stakeholder has made a significant difference to a school curriculum.

3. Compare the broad detail of two curricula at national and/or state level. Do they have different goals? Apart from the subject areas, how much emphasis is there on other aspects that are relevant to learning and teaching?

4. Imagine that an official curriculum document does not require teachers and schools to take into consideration student diversity, developmental needs, gifted and talented needs, or special needs when the school and classroom curricula are designed and constructed. Is there a sound rationale for attending to these or are they optional extras?

5. A teacher is thinking about implementing a radical Grade 5 classroom curriculum where her students get to decide what they will learn. She wants to go ahead with the idea but doubts others will disapprove. She wisely decides to seek advice. With reference to your own life experience, what do you think other curriculum stakeholders, such as her students' parents, her principal, the teachers in her school and in the local high school might say?

6. An inexperienced teacher discovers that he can buy ready-to-use units of work on-line. With reference to your local context what advice would you offer in regard to the selection of a unit of work for purchase?

7. With reference to your local context, what kinds of curriculum design and classroom pedagogy might help to reduce the impact of the 'hidden' curriculum?

Essay Topic or Research Project

Identify an aspect of this chapter that has given you food for thought in terms of theory and/or practice. Critically discuss relevant aspects of theory and practice, then develop an idea you could implement in the classroom.

Further Reading

Official curriculum documents (national and/or state)

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