

Interrogating the Dialectical Relationship between Society and the School Curriculum: An Educational Sociology Perspective

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ABSTRACT In this paper the researcher explores the discourse of the dialectical or mutual relationship between society and the curriculum. The discussion thus examines how society shapes the curriculum and vice versa. In the discourse, the contexts of social reproduction, transformation, decolonisation of the societal curriculum and their implications for what to teach (curriculum) and how to teach (pedagogy) form the basis of the arguments. These arguments draw largely on views on reconstructing the curriculum debate and on views on the curriculum in and out of context. Other views that are also used are those of Durkheim on pedagogy and sociology. For the latter part of the paper, the aforementioned concepts are explored in detail using examples from notions of curriculum as a document; process; a concept that describes that which is taught in schools; a set of subjects; the content of education; a program of studies; a sequence of courses; a set of performance objectives; a course of study or everything that goes on within the school, including extra-class activities, guidance and interpersonal relationships between educators, educators and learners as well as learners amongst themselves. Other conceptualisations of the term curriculum presented in this paper include perception of curriculum as everything that is planned by school personnel including a series of experiences undergone by learners or what the learners experience as a result of attending a school, an educational institution. The discussion thus unfolds by unpacking the different conceptions of the curriculum as a contextualised and contested social process that impacts heavily on school and society.

INTRODUCTION

The concept curriculum as etymologically defined from its early Latin origins literally means to run a course (Wilson 2008). For Wilson, if one thinks of a marathon with mile and direction markers, signposts, water stations, and officials and coaches along the route, this beginning definition is a metaphor of what the curriculum has become in the education of our children. However, Carr (2008) asserted that there are several conceptions of the term curriculum and among these are also his views. For him, the term curriculum implies a broad range of the educational aims and values by which subject matter or content is selected, it's underpinning philosophy of knowledge (epistemological principles) and the pedagogical ways through which the content is taught, learned and assessed. An analysis of this view of the curriculum entails all of Bernstein's (2010) three message systems of schooling: content, pedagogy and assessment. Carr's definition does not only refer to curriculum as the content of education but also includes the methods of classroom instruction and the

general activities of teaching and learning as well as the evaluation or assessment of what is taught and learnt. For Carr, all other definitions of curriculum such as those adopted by parents, educators and businesses to imply the academic stuff that is done to children in school and teacher directions or student activities that can be purchased from any number of curriculum publishers should address society's needs (Jansen 2012). According to Christie (2008), teachers in schools even use the term curriculum in different ways depending on their views and needs. Doll (2013) noted that in a school staff room one may hear statements about curriculum such as the following:

"There's not enough time in the day to get through the curriculum. The reading curriculum's great but I hate that maths curriculum. I found this great curriculum website the other day that has all kinds of ideas for science lessons! The kids are really making progress since I began modifying the curriculum to better meet their needs (p. 176)."

The above observations demonstrate that there are several conceptions of the term curricu-

ulum, which include activities and structures experienced by students which can be formal or informal, explicit (overt) or implicit (covert); content and processes by which learners gain knowledge and understanding, develop skills and alter attitudes, appreciations, and values under the auspices of that school (Doll 2013). Another curriculum theorist, Oliva (1997) maintained that the school curriculum as a concept describes that which is taught in schools; a set of subjects; the content of education; a program of studies; a sequence of courses; a set of performance objectives; a course of study or everything that goes on within the school, including extra-class activities, guidance and interpersonal relationships between educators, educators and learners as well as learners amongst themselves. Oliva further argued that it is everything that is planned by school personnel including a series of experiences undergone by learners or what the learners experience as a result of attending a school, an educational institution. Given that the paper adopts a conceptual approach, it is important to note that the discussion, methodology and results centre on the fact that it discusses a conceptual issue of the relationship of curriculum and society as presented below.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a conceptual approach to examine the literature on how the curriculum and the society in which it is practised as a product, process, content and praxis are related. It is noteworthy that there are basically four ways of approaching curriculum theory and practice, which are curriculum as product given that certain skills are essential to master and facts to know (Jansen 2010). The second approach views curriculum in society as a process involving the interaction of teachers, learner or students and knowledge. The third approach is that which regards the curriculum as content implying that it is a practice that is contextually shaped and as praxis it also implies that a practice should not focus exclusively on individuals alone or the group alone but must explore how both create understandings and practices (Jansen 2010). Focusing particularly on curriculum as context and as praxis, it is clear that these approaches seem to align well with my perception of the curriculum as societally determined (Young 2008). A con-

textual approach opens the door for educational institutions to critique how curriculum – and therefore education – reproduces unequal social relations in society after graduation (Jansen 2010).

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Academics are trying to rid many African institutions of the procedures, values, norms, practices, thinking, beliefs and choices that mark anything non-European and not white as inferior (le Grange 2016). They call it decolonising the curriculum and for many of them it forms part of this work. But the question of what exactly this actually means remains shrouded in mysteries (Mgqwashu 2017). The definition of decolonising the curriculum remains a grey area and there's also no clarity about whose responsibility it is to undertake this process. It's crucial to develop shared understandings and ideas of the meaning of both curriculum and decolonisation. American curriculum theorist William Pinar (2012) defines curriculum theory as the interdisciplinary study of educational experience. Educational experience implies more than just the topics covered in a course. It encompasses the attitudes, values, dispositions and world views that get learned, un-learned, re-learned, reformed, deconstructed and reconstructed while studying towards a degree. Examining what is decolonisation when it comes to university curricula, this seems to involve replacing works from Europe or the global North with local theorists and African authors (Le Grange 2016). This is meant to prevent African universities from becoming mere extensions of former colonisers. But decolonising the curriculum is far more nuanced than replacing theorists and authors. If curriculum encompasses a broader educational experience, universities first need to define how they approach the development and dissemination of curricula. Only then can they move forward with the process of decolonisation (Chilisa 2012; Mgqwashu 2017).

Curriculum as praxis creates conditions to democratise learning spaces. It makes room for both individual and group identities within the teaching and learning context (Mgqwashu 2017). This creates shared and negotiated understandings and practices while knowledge is being generated and disseminated through educational institutions in society (Young 1998). Societies

that wish to decolonize their curricula could benefit from understanding these approaches. This might also help people to stop conflating transformation – another imperative at institutions of higher learning especially universities and in South Africa more broadly – with decolonization (Mgqwashu 2017). Many people in South Africa use the terms transformation and decolonisation interchangeably. In curriculum debates after apartheid, transformation has come to mean replacing texts by scholars and writers who are white or European with work done by those who are neither (Yeatman 2012). These debates invoke strong emotions and responses. An overwhelming impression has emerged, that decolonisation equals an attack on white academics by black academics. This perception, in the researcher's view, requires unsettling because decolonisation is not a project over which one racial group in society can claim sole custodianship. The researcher argues that South Africans, as a people, must agree that colonialism and apartheid robbed the country of ideas, skills, creativity, originality, talent and knowledge. All of these attributes got lost through legislated discrimination of black people, most of whom could have enriched their society or country even further (Yeatman 2012). But some people who have benefited directly from the ills of colonialism and apartheid still struggle to accept this fact. They have developed a false need to defend a system that maimed, dehumanised, oppressed and stripped generation after generation of the South African majority (Gale 2008). These groups, the researcher argues, should be the first to be genuinely repentant about this history. They need to openly acknowledge what's become a common lie at many institutions of higher learning particularly universities that if something is white or European, it's superior to anything black or African (Chilisa 2012). To put it in plain terms, white South African academics are as vital in driving genuine curriculum change as their black peers. Therefore black and white academics are in this together and it will involve conscious, deliberate, non-hypocritical and diligent interest by both black and white academics in indigenous knowledge systems, cultures, peoples and languages (Gale 2008). Theories must be generated that are informed by life as it is lived, experienced and understood by local social inhabitants. Institutions of higher learning, particularly universities need to in-

troduce well theorised scholarship emerging from, and underpinned by the African local experiences and this must happen across disciplines (Yeatman 2012). All of this work will encourage the growth of truly African societies and institutions of learning. Charles Eliot (1998: 27) a former Harvard University President, once described the characteristics of an American university by saying,

"A university must grow from seed. It cannot be transplanted from England or Germany in full leaf and bearing. When the American university appears, it will not be a copy of foreign institutions, but the slow and natural growth of American social and political habits."

The researcher's perception of a decolonised societal curriculum foregrounds African identities and world views. But this does not exempt it from critique. Societal universities need to keep encouraging critique and problematisation of what is considered to be knowledge and the processes involved in generating it (Gale 2008). And a decolonised societal curriculum needs to exist in dialogue and contestation with the Greek, Arab and European worlds. It cannot be seen to be everything about all things. It must, however, be noted that the many and varied conceptions of the term curriculum have given rise to multiple forms or types of curricula as outlined by Wilson (2008): (1) overt or explicit curriculum, which is the written part of formal schooling (formal curriculum), (2) Societal curriculum, defined by Cortes (2011) as the massive, on-going, informal curriculum of family, peer groups, neighbourhoods, churches, organizations, occupations, mass media and other socializing forces that educate all of us throughout our lives, (3) the hidden or covert curriculum, which describes tacit learning or that which is implied by the very structure and nature of schools, much of what revolves around daily or established routines (Wilson 2008). Longstreet and Shane (2013) offered a commonly accepted definition for this form of curriculum by saying it refers to the kinds of learnings children derive from the very nature and organizational design of the school, as well as from the behaviours and attitudes of teachers and administrators. According to Taylor (2007), examples of the hidden curriculum include the messages and lessons derived from the mere organizational structure or authority hierarchy of their schools. Other examples of the hidden

curricular forms include an emphasis on sequential room arrangements; timed segments of formal instruction; disciplined messages where concentration is equated with student behaviours whether sitting up straight and being continually quiet; their getting in and standing in line silently; quietly raising their hands to be called on; the endless competition for grades among other things (Moore 2010). The hidden curriculum also includes the subtle message system the students derive from schooling, (4) the null curriculum, which Wilson (2008) views as that which educators do not teach, thus giving students the message that these elements are not important in their educational experiences or in our society. Eisner (2015: 103) offered some major insights as he concludes his argument of the null curriculum. He noted that schools have consequences not only by virtue of what they do not teach, but also by virtue of what they neglect to teach. What students cannot consider and what they are unable to use have consequences for the kinds of lives they will lead (Bernstein 2010). From this perspective, it follows that the null curriculum is simply that which is not taught in schools because somehow, somewhere, some people will always be empowered to make conscious decisions as to what is to be included and what is to be excluded from the overt (written) curriculum (Eisner 2015; Jansen 2010). Since it is physically impossible to teach everything in schools, many topics and subject areas are always intentionally excluded from the written curriculum.

For Wilson (2008) (5) the phantom curriculum is yet another type of curricula in which students learn the message systems prevalent in and through their exposure to any forms of media. These components and messages play a major part in the enculturation of students into the predominant meta-culture of their society or in acculturating students into narrower or generational subcultures. The concomitant curriculum makes for the sixth type according to Wilson and it describes what is taught or emphasized at home and those experiences that are part of a family's experiences or related experiences sanctioned by the family (Moore 2010). For Wilson such a curriculum may be received at church, in the context of religious expression, lessons on values, ethics or morals, moulded

behaviours or social experiences based on the family's preferences. The seventh type of curriculum in Wilson's (2008) typology is the rhetorical curriculum - comprised of ideas offered by policymakers, school officials, administrators or politicians. This curriculum may also come from those professionals involved in concept formation and content changes or from those educational initiatives resulting from decisions based on state, political landscape and state reports, public speeches or from texts critiquing outdated educational policies and practices (Wilson 2008; Young 2008). The rhetorical curriculum can be viewed in terms of what Jansen (2010) calls political symbolism to mark a transition from one political dispensation to the next as happened in the South African system of education during the transition from apartheid education regime to the new democratic order of the post-apartheid curriculum especially the advent of Curriculum 2005, which ushered in dawn of Outcomes Based Education curriculum (OBE). Such a curriculum may also come from the publicized works offering updates in pedagogical content knowledge. In his eighth typology of curricular types, Wilson identifies what he termed the curriculum in-use, which, in my view is a re-description of the formal curriculum (written or overt) because he maintains that such a curriculum comprises the things in textbooks, and content and concepts in the syllabi or curriculum guides.

The aforementioned basically implies that the curriculum-in-use is the actual curriculum that is delivered and presented by each teacher. He develops his conception of the curriculum-in-use by adding yet another dimension, which he called the (9) received curriculum, implying those things that students actually take out of classroom: the concepts and content that are truly learned and remembered. The final curricular type Wilson (2008) calls the (10) internal curriculum and by this he refers to the processes, content, knowledge combined with the experiences and realities of the learners to create new knowledge. He notes that while educators should be aware of this curriculum, they have little control over the internal curriculum since it is unique to each student. Given the above mentioned conceptualizations and typologies of the school curriculum, the next section examines its mutual or dialectical relationship with society.

Society and the Curriculum as Mutually Constitutive Entities

The views expressed above clearly demonstrate that term curriculum as generally accepted by teachers, parents, politicians and policy-makers in society is basically synonymous with syllabus or the content of education to be transmitted by teachers in a given society's schools. However, for Carr such a perception of the curriculum is narrow and restrictive as it fails to capture the broad nature of the concept. Carr also criticises views that regard curriculum as merely the activities and structures experienced by students which can be formal or informal covert or overt and argues that an ideal view of the curriculum should encapsulate the content and processes by which students gain knowledge and understanding, develop skills and alter attitudes, appreciations and values under the auspices of a school, college or university (Gale 2010). Here, the emphasis is on how the curriculum articulates expected outcomes or learning objectives, procedures and steps to be followed during the course of student's education (Ball 2008). His latter view dovetails with Bernstein's conception of the three messages system of education: curriculum, pedagogy and assessment as the chief means by which society is reproduced and maintained through education (Bernstein 2010). It is in this sense that one can argue that what is taught in the school (curriculum) and how it is taught (pedagogy) are essentially social constructs and therefore relative (Ball 2008). For theorists such as Ball (2010) and Jansen (2010), this gives rise to notions of curriculum as text, discourse and even as political symbolism because even power relations are involved in the social construction of what counts as valid knowledge (Mutekwe 2014; Young 2008). Sociologists such as Durkheim (1956) and Arendt (2010) would argue that society shapes the content of education and to some extent determines how it has to be passed on from one generation to the next if the ideals and goals that society are to be sustained.

Eisner (2015) shared the above views by arguing that the social forces behind the implementation of purposefully developed plans for the teaching of curriculum as the content of education comes from far and wide including the ideas and values of various social groups in society. Ball (2008) and Carr (2010) concurred

that these include their social goals, ideas about culture and diversity, social pressures, ideologies and beliefs about social change. For Carr, it is important to note that at the social foundation of every school curriculum, including the planning, design and implementation stages are the ideologies, belief, values and philosophies of not only those directly involved in the process but also members of the dominant social groups in society, such as special interest groups who propose what should be included. Other issues that have important implications for the relationship between curriculum and society include the views that for a curriculum to develop and reflect society's ideals, the input of various societal members- environmental and social, economic and political groups need to be taken on board either directly or indirectly (Blackledge and Hunt 2010; Carr 2010). For instance, environmental groups may insist that students be taught about conservation, and the inculcation of values to love the environment, while healthy groups might advocate issues of HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment. On another hand, human rights activists may advocate the teaching of human rights issues and government may insist on citizenship and patriotic and democratic ideologies (Eisner 2015). Gender activists might, on the other hand also argue in favour of gender sensitivity in the school curriculum while crime prevention groups may emphasize that crime prevention be made part and parcel of the school curriculum (Eisner 2015; Jansen 2010). The aforementioned shows how the school curriculum is related to the interests and ideals of the wider society in which the school is located.

According to Carr (2010) the above view of society and the curriculum presupposes it is not only the content and syllabuses of the subject matter that is transmitted to students by educators and schools but the process also encompasses values, beliefs, the political rhetoric and ideologies that are cherished by society in a particular historical epoch. Although Carr views the narrow traditional perception of curriculum as merely implying the content or syllabus to be covered in schools as the one easily favoured by parents, policy makers and politicians, he laments this perspective on the grounds that it fails to take into account what curriculum theorists including himself would regard as the wider aspects which real teaching and learning should encapsulate. He cites, for example, the

social organization of knowledge, goals of education, pedagogy, evaluation and intended outcomes and further notes that with such a perception the relationship between society and the curriculum becomes not only narrow but somehow restrictive in that it limits the perceptual horizons that should constitute an ideal school curriculum for society. For him, curriculum entails a set of proposals indicating how the subject matter is to be organized, the educational, social, political and economic purposes it serves and the learning outcomes it is intended to achieve as well as the methods by which such outcomes are to be evaluated (Carr 2010: 5). It is important to note that while Carr does not prescribe a curriculum but explains it, he also proposes that one cannot really make sense of curriculum without an understanding that it is in a mutual or reciprocal relationship with the society in which it is adopted (Zhou and Ferris 2013). For Carr, all these aspects have relevance in explaining the link of curriculum to society because they allude to society's expectations of school curricula especially how the curricula need to ensure that education system upholds society's functional prerequisites such as ensuring that the school products plough back the skills acquired, and that schools initiate learners in worthwhile societal practices and traditions by transmitting worthwhile knowledge that will change the beneficiaries for the better (McIntyre 2011; Peters 2012). Seen in this light, it is therefore crucial to argue cogently that a mutual relationship exists between society and the curriculum. Further discussing the relationship of society and the curriculum Carr (2010) asserted that society and the curriculum are mutually constitutive because they are in a dialectical relationship in which the former (society) shapes the latter (curriculum) while the latter also shapes the former. It is this sense that Carr (2008) maintained that society produces the curriculum while the curriculum also reproduces society and contributes to its transformation. An example of this can be seen in societies that have adopted a liberal education curriculum resulting in its population being empowered to change archaic ways of doing things. Carr (2010) expressed this view succinctly when he noted that the hidden curriculum, for example, functions to initiate pupils into the cultural, economic and political life of their society. In this way, the curriculum serves as a vehicle for social reproduction, a process

by which social groups reproduce themselves over time in order to sustain their identity across generations. This idea is also shared by functionalist sociologists Durkheim (1956) and Parsons (1972) who attributed the total enculturation or socialization of individuals into their societal norms and values to secondary socialization by such institutions of society as school, polity, religion and peer groups among others. Carr asserted that the curriculum plays this socialization role by reproducing forms of consciousness and structures of the social relationships that are cherished by contemporary society at any historical epoch. The curriculum thus serves to transmit a society's cultural heritage from generation to generation (Carr 2008; Durkheim 1956). It passes on a society's values, beliefs, ideologies and the structures of the society in which it is designed. Arguing from a conflict perspective, he noted that it (school curriculum) produces class strata, gender and ethnic polarizations even racial divides as they are viewed in society (Arendt 2010).

Developing Plato's views of a good society, Peters (2012) asserted that the school curriculum can be viewed as a mechanism through which the notion of a good society is reproduced. This implies that if the society is democratic, chances are that elements of democracy will also be embodied in that society's school curriculum (Mutekwe 2014). This idea is succinctly expressed in Carr's view that different ways of conceptualising democracy give divergent views to the implications of the relationship between society and the school curriculum. In his discussion of curriculum in and for democracy, Carr pointed out that education and democracy are highly correlated in many societies and the school curriculum in and for democracy ought to make individual learners see this relationship as a product of democracy and a democratic society's ideals (Carr 2010). In terms of the content of educational (curriculum or the what to teach), it follows therefore that what a society considers as the ideal curriculum content should be the ideas, aspirations, beliefs, values and ideologies of the society that has developed that curriculum. Althusser's (1971), Bernstein's (2010), Bourdieu's (2008) and Bowles and Gintis' (1976) theories of the role of education as a vehicle for social and cultural reproduction succinctly explain this view. For Bernstein, for example, the curriculum in every society always

derives from the values, beliefs and ideologies of that society and therefore, how a society selects what it regards as a valid knowledge or curriculum is always from the views, philosophies, aspirations and ideologies of the middle class, or the dominant members of each society. Cornbleth (2008) concurred with Trowler (2008) that the manner in which individuals think and perceive the curriculum has implications for how it is ultimately studied and this affects their understanding of curricular processes. This idea is also raised by Carr (2008: 5) when he asserted that curriculum is sometimes viewed as synonymous with syllabus. Drawing from Cornbleth's argument, it follows therefore that a change in curriculum also results in social changes. As a social construct, the school curriculum is also clearly affected by the power matrix obtaining in the society in which it is formulated (Young 2008). Its selection, organization and treatment of knowledge (Cornbleth) is thus related to the dominant social group's interests, values, aspirations and beliefs. This partly explains why Durkheim (1956) argued that a curriculum reflects the culture of the society in which it is practiced. A critical evaluation of this contention leads one to infer that the way a society chooses what it considers as valid knowledge worth inclusion in the school curriculum and to be learnt by children in schools is largely dependent upon that society's beliefs, norms, values, perceptions and other social dispositions that the society considers to constitute a good society (Carr 2010; Mutekwe 2014).

CONCLUSION

The discussion in this paper demonstrates that curriculum construction is precisely a social process whose planning, design and implementation are ongoing social activities as Cornbleth argued. The dialectical relationship of society and the curriculum is thus explicitly and implicitly embodied in it (curriculum) and that it is shaped by the values, norms, beliefs and ideologies cherished in the society in which it is adopted in schools. The perception of curriculum as a contextualized social process thus implies that it depends on the ideological values, beliefs and other social dispositions that a given society holds. The role of educators and learner in such a curriculum should thus reflect the adult-young relationships cherished in the wider

society or in the common world. The same is true of the power relations typical of the interaction between educators and their learners in the implementation of the school curriculum. Seen in this light, it can thus be concluded with some certainty that due to the mutual relationship of society and the curriculum, a clear understanding of the school curriculum and how it might be transformed requires that the cultural values of the wider social system be fully taken into account. These include issues such as the diversity of the learners in a given societal and school context, their multicultural attributes and the overall ideological positions of that society. Curriculum changes should thus be viewed as societal and contextual changes. This is because curriculum changes are often triggered by changes in the wider social structure. It is in this sense that this research study maintains that the school curriculum should be viewed as a form of knowledge to be taught in schools as social structures as both a process and a form of knowledge considered suitable for each social milieu. No wonder education or curriculum implementation is often regarded as a process of transmitting a people's culture. It is sociologically synonymous with socialization or enculturation. The content of such education (socialisation) is the society's cultural heritage, which the society believes should be passed on from one generation to the next consisting of that society's norms, skills, knowledge, values, beliefs, attitudes, ideologies and all other social dispositions that are cherished in that society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the overarching perception unpacked in this paper that a dialectical relationship exists between society and the curriculum on the grounds that these two concepts shape each other as part of social and cultural reproduction, the following recommendations are made; whether one looks at curriculum as a document such as a syllabus of a particular subject area or as a set of goals, procedures and all experiences endured or enjoyed by students as part of their schooling, curriculum planning for school and society needs to adopt a profound rational debate and consensus amongst designers or planners, implementers and all other stakeholders in the process. Informed by the observations in this paper about the contentious issues sur-

rounding curriculum planning or design, it is further recommended that perhaps critical curriculum policy analysis would be well served by explanations or debates of curriculum policy analysis methods and processes that concern themselves with the *who* and *how* of curriculum production since these aspects are not separate endeavours by virtue of going hand-in-glove. Such discourses also require a less rigid account of curriculum policy contexts and their structural relations. The aforementioned calls for policy activism so that it (educational curriculum) is not only produced and reproduced by actors variously located within western democracies in a theoretical sense but takes cognisance of the society in which it is to be adopted. Such engagement by curriculum policy actors should also be acknowledged and enhanced as an expression of a radical democracy. In the curriculum policy analysis discourse, an account of policy making, the intention should therefore be to establish free and fair conditions for new conversations especially genuine expressions of interest, understanding and aspirations and for new actions and proactive engagements with local and global constraints and opportunities. What should be envisaged, then, should be opportunities for curriculum planners and or actors to focus on a wider sense of curriculum planning communities and for policy conversations across cultural and contextual boundaries, directed at collective commitments and for pursuing creative possibilities. This should be made a constant and on-going task for all stakeholders involved in curriculum planning and educational policy analysis and reforms. Finally, the relations between curriculum policy actors and the strategies they employ to review, analyse and produce school curricula need to reflect honest intentions about the society in which the school curriculum is to be adopted.

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