



CURRICULUM THEORY: CHARACTERISTICS AND FUNCTIONS

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Abstract:

This is a concept paper in education specifically about curriculum theory. Curriculum theory is a sub-theory of educational theory. Theories provide views about the world. They explain reality. The process of education in general and the field of curriculum in particular are embedded in theory. Teachers and other educators rely on theory in research about the school curriculum. Curriculum theory gives direction and guidance in the process of curriculum planning, development, implementation, supervision, evaluation among others. This concept paper delves on curriculum theory: Its definition, development, functions and characteristics. The paper also explains categories of curriculum theories and theorists. The issues discussed in this paper can trigger research in theory development and inform educationists and teachers in theory development and research in curriculum.

Keywords: curriculum theory; theory development; theory functions; theory categories; curriculum theorists, research

1. Introduction

Theories provide views about the world. They explain reality. The process of education in general and the field of curriculum in particular are embedded in theory. Teachers and other educators rely on theory in research about the school curriculum. Curriculum theory gives direction and guidance in the process of curriculum planning, development, implementation, supervision, and evaluation. This concept paper delves on curriculum theory: its definition, development, functions and characteristics. The paper also explains categories of curriculum theories and theorists.

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2. What is a theory?

The term theory is derived from a Greek word “theoria” meaning “wakefulness of mind”. Merriam Webster’s Learners Dictionary defines a theory as an idea or set of ideas that is intended to explain facts or events. The Oxford Dictionary defines a theory as a set of principles in which the practice of an activity is based.

According to Kerlinger (1973) a theory is a set of interrelated constructs (concepts), definitions and propositions that present a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining and predicting phenomena. Beauchamp (1982: 58) defines a theory as “*a set of related statements that are arranged so as to give functional meaning to a series of events*”. The set of related statements may take the form of descriptive or functional definitions, operational constructs, assumptions, postulates, hypotheses, generalizations, laws or theorems. Other scholars, Ornstein and Hunkins (1998: 173) opine that a “*a theory is the device for interpreting, criticizing, unifying, established laws, modifying them to fit data unanticipated in their formation and guiding the enterprise of discovering new and more powerful generalizations*”. In this paper, a theory is defined as a set of statements that explains or describes phenomena.

2.1 What is a curriculum theory?

Various scholars have attempted to define a curriculum theory. Beauchamp (1982:58) defines a curriculum theory as a set of related statements that gives meaning to a school’s curriculum by pointing out the relationships among its elements and by directing its development, its use and its evaluation. Glatthorn, Boschee and Whitehead (2006:74) define a curriculum theory as “*a set of related educational concepts that affords a systematic and illuminating perspective of curricular phenomena*”. Hewitt (2006: 133) opines that a curriculum theory is a set of propositions, observations, facts, beliefs, policies and procedures proposed or followed as a basis for curriculum action. Marsh and Willis (2007) assert that curriculum theories are assets of principles and methods sufficiently worked out and rationalized to provide a guide for creating curricula.

Curriculum theory is a sub theory of educational theory (Beauchamp (1982; Henson, 2001). Beauchamp (1982) asserts that all theories are derived from three broad categories of knowledge: (i) The Humanities; (ii) The Natural Sciences; and (iii) The Social Sciences. These divisions of knowledge are well established as the basic realms of knowledge. Humanities include disciplines of Philosophy, Music, Art, and Literature. Social sciences encompass History, Sociology, Psychology and Anthropology. Natural sciences include Chemistry, Physics, Botany, Geology among others. Education draws from the social sciences but borrows from both humanities and natural sciences. Education combines knowledge from various disciplines. Curriculum theories fall under education theories.

In this paper, a curriculum theory is defined as a sub-theory in education that explains and describes curriculum phenomena. In this case, curriculum phenomena encompass the elements of curriculum such as the objectives, content, learning experiences and methods of evaluation.

2.2 Research and theory: The relationship

Teachers and other educators rely on theory in research about the school curriculum. Research and theory complement each other in that theory guides research while the process of research tests, validates and develops theories. The relationship between theory and research may be summarized as follows:

- 1) a theory suggests a number of problems and hypotheses which need to be investigated.
- 2) a theory guides research, facilitates the selection of key variables and relevant cases and delimits the scope of inquiry by pinpointing significant facts.
- 3) a theory facilitates an effective summation of empirical findings.
- 4) research tests, validates or repudiates theories.
- 5) research helps theory building.
- 6) research findings enhance the clarity of theoretical constructs and variables.
- 7) research enhances the predictive power, precision, validity and verification of theories.

2.3 Models and theories differentiated

Models are sub-theories. Curriculum models represent curriculum theory. Beauchamp (1982) asserts that models are analogies. The construction of a model is a way of representing given phenomena and their relationships. Marsh & Willis (2007:100) concur with Beauchamp and assert that:

“Models can be useful, detailed perspectives on some particulars of the curriculum in action, but not the total picture. To the extent that they fail to account for the complexities of the planned curriculum, the enacted curriculum, and the experienced curriculum, they are not entirely satisfactory solutions to the problem of creating curriculum theories.”

However, various models in curriculum have been empirically tested and are widely used in curriculum research process. They also guide curriculum activities. The most popular ones are Ralph Tyler’s (1949) and Hilda Taba’s (1962) models of curriculum development. Models may be created to show relationships among curriculum designs, the curriculum engineering procedures and evaluation processes. Beauchamp (1982) opines that a mature theory is undergirded by sub-theories so curriculum workers must work at identifying and building sub theories of curriculum.

2.4 Characteristics of an ‘effective’ theory

Walker (2003) proposes four criteria for a good curriculum theory thus: (i) Validity - meaningfulness, logical consistency, and factual correctness; (ii) Theoretical power - basic understanding; (iii) Serviceability - the use of theory in resolving central curriculum problems; and (iv) Morality - clarifies underlying values.

According to Beauchamp (1982:82) any curriculum theory should:

- a. begin by defining its set of events;
- b. make clear its accepted values and sources for making decisions;

- c. specify the characteristics of curriculum design;
- d. describe the essential processes for making curriculum decisions and the interrelationships among those processes;
- e. provide for continuous regeneration of curriculum decisions.

Goodson (1994) opines that the value of curriculum theory must be judged against the existing curriculum as defined and as negotiated and realized in schools. He adds that curriculum research and theory must begin by investigating how the curriculum is currently constructed and then produced by teachers in different circumstances in which they are placed. Another scholar, Urevbu (1990) proposes that a curriculum theory addresses itself to the question of what we should teach, in part by calling for a rationale for why we should do one thing rather than another. Osmon and Craver (1999) advice that if a theory does not help us communicate in a better and more advantageous way, criticize our assumptions and actions, gain perspective, seek out new possibilities, order to direct practice, then we had better let it go or revise it in new directions.

On the other hand, Hewitt (2006) suggests that curriculum theory is substantiated as a theory by considering various principles: Power, logical explanation, a plan, considering the common places and adherence to a formal style of presentation. He adds that the worth of a theory will come in its use, whether it successfully guides practice, helps to solve problems or leads to furthering new knowledge in curriculum work. On the same note Henson (2001) states that curriculum theories guide the curriculum developers thinking which can indirectly improve curriculum design. A good theory cannot be of value if it's obscure. It should not be complicated.

In summary, an 'effective' theory should possess various characteristics as follows:

- 1) a theory must permit deductions and generate laws that can be tested empirically.
- 2) a theory must be compatible with both observation and previously validated theories.
- 3) theories must be stated in simple terms. a theory is best if it explains the most in the simplest way.
- 4) a theory should have considerable explanatory and predictive potential.
- 5) a theory should be productive in the research field.
- 6) a test of the theory must be replicable.

2.5 Functions of a theory

Theories serve various functions as supported by various scholars (Nyandusi, 2017; Beauchamp, 1982; Ornstein & Hunkins, 1998; Otunga et al, 2011; Glatthorn et al, 2006) as follows:

A. Description function

Theories provide a narrative classification of knowledge in a particular field. They interpret the complex activities in the discipline. Curriculum theories serve to describe curriculum phenomena such as the elements of curriculum (objectives, content, learning experiences and evaluation) and curriculum processes (planning, development, and

implementation). Teachers and curriculum planners draw from diverse theories in curriculum activities (Syomwene, Nabwire & Musamas, 2015).

B. Prediction function

A theory can predict the occurrence of unobserved events on the basis of explanatory principles embedded in the theory.

C. Explanation function

Theories address the why? question. A theory points out the relationship between phenomena and suggests the reasons for the relationships.

D. Guidance function

A theory helps researchers to collect and analyze relevant data about a phenomenon. Theories serve a directive function especially in research.

According to Ornstein & Hunkins (1998) with theory, curriculum decision makers can draw on the most advanced and valid knowledge available and apply it to many situations. We can provide ourselves with ways of viewing the world and how it works so that education will be 'real', will relate to the world, and will have applicability to real issues and challenges. Commenting on the functions of theories, Henson (2001) warns that theories do not always produce correct answers and they never tell us what we should do. Although some theories have predictive powers and can tell us what will very likely happen if we do this or that, the decision to choose one alternative over another is ours. So, the role of the theory is not to guide our behaviour, rather it is to help guide our thinking.

2.6 Curriculum theory development activities

The process of theory development includes a series of varied activities. The process of theory development is tied to inductive and deductive thinking (Ornstein & Hunkins, 1998). Inductive process entails building a theory by accumulating and summarizing a variety of inquiries. It involves forming propositions on the basis of research from tentative hypothesis that are tested and validated. Inductive process proceeds from specific to general. Deductive process is a contrast to induction. It is a process of inferring necessary conclusions from a combination of premises whose truth has either been accepted as given or assumed to be true. Deductive process proceeds from general to specific through which a logical sequence is constructed.

Beauchamp (1982) proposes four distinct steps of theory development:

- a. **Establishment of descriptive and prescriptive definitions of technical terms.** According to Beauchamp (1982) the terms should be defined with care and used consistently once defined. These can include terms such as curriculum, implementation, development, design, evaluation, planning, content, learning experiences, objectives among others.
- b. **Classification of existing and new knowledge.** This brings order and relationship.

- c. **Inferential and predictive research.** An inference is a proposition or generalization derived from evidence by reasoning while a prediction is a case of inference (Beauchamp, 1982). For predictive relationships, research is designed so that one can estimate the unknown from the known.
- d. **Sub-theory development and development and use of models.** At this step are possibilities of development of sub-theories for instance in curriculum design, curriculum planning, curriculum implementation and curriculum evaluation. Model building is another activity in this step.

Ornstein & Hunkins (1998) concurs with Beauchamp (1982) in his first two steps of theory development. Consequently, the two authors propose two main steps in theory building:

- a. **Defining terms.** The terms to be defined are those that the terms theorists employ, and the concepts implied by those terms are the building blocks of a theory. Terms are the concepts, or the variables between which the empirical relationships are to be sought.
- b. **Classifying terms.** Theorists attempt to organize and integrate what they know about the areas being theorized. Classifications enable theorists to discover gaps in their knowledge that must be filled through research activities if they are to give meaning to their theorizing. During classification, facts and generalizations are grouped into homogenous groups.

3. Curriculum Theorists

Early theory in curriculum can be traced with the works of various educationists. Franklin Bobbit's work 'the curriculum' was the starting point in theorizing in curriculum. He emphasized looking for truth in curriculum field. In addition, was John Dewey's work in which he tried to show the relationship between education and society. Also, Ralph Tyler, in his model of curriculum development emphasized on curriculum objectives in the curriculum development process. He proposed three sources of curriculum objectives: The learners, the society and the subject matter. Another scholar in this period was James B. McDonald who showed interactions between curriculum, instruction and teaching.

Curriculum theorists can be placed in various categories as supported by various scholars (Nyandusi, 2017; Ornstein & Hunkins, 1998; Glatthorn et al, 2006; Pinar, 2009; Marsh & Willis, 2007; Doll, 1993). These include:

- a. **Traditionalists.** Traditionalists are mainly concerned with bases for selecting, organizing and sequencing curriculum content. They are involved in structural theorizing. According to Pinar (2009), traditionalists focus on schools and are less interested in basic research and in theory development. Examples are educationists such as John Dewey, Franklin Bobbit, Ralph Tyler, Hilda Taba, George Beauchamp, Ronald Doll and John Goodlad.
- b. **Conceptual empiricists.** These theorists are concerned with research for theory development. They develop hypothesis and test them (Pinar, 2009). Ornstein and

Hunkins (1998) opine that conceptual empiricists are actively exploring the application of cognitive science to curriculum and instructional research. Conceptual empiricists emphasize on content-based theories. Examples in the camp include Benjamin Bloom, Jerome Bruner, George Posner and Robert Stake.

- c. **Reconceptualists/ Critical theorists.** These are theorists who shift their attention from curriculum development to curriculum understanding. They critique the field of curriculum. Ornstein & Hunkins (1998:185) opine that critical theorists “*maintain the view that intellectual and scientific distance from curriculum practice are required if those in charge of education are to effectively critique and theorize existing programs*”. They drive a wedge between theory and practice. They urge educationists to shift their attention from curriculum development to curriculum understanding. They adopt a critical and exploratory approach in curriculum (Ornstein & Hunkins; Marsh & Willis, 2007). They focus on liberation of schools and society from the political and economic establishments. They have a value laden perspective and a politically emancipatory intent (Pinar, 2009). Feminist theorists fall in this category. These are theorists who reflect and hypothesize on the imbalances and inequalities experienced by women in the society and the world in general.
- d. **Post modernists.** This is an emerging paradigm in curriculum theory that draws heavily on dynamism of knowledge. It’s a thinking characterized by the reluctance to accept any one way of viewing the world. Post modernists posit that there’s not one way to interpret or theorize about curriculum. Postmodernism is a refusal to accept any unified representation of the world. It has a hybridizing intent in terms of content and learning experience (Ornstein & Hunkins, 1998). Post modernists engage in deconstructing the world, curriculum theory included. This includes redefining curriculum. Actually, the strength of post modernism is the creation of new knowledge and the transformation of learning (Doll, 1993).

According to Marsh and Willis (2007) postmodernism is a social consciousness characterized by a desire to challenge dated modernist assumptions, to question claims to truth, and to develop new ways of thinking. Writing about a post modernism, Doll (1993) observes that curriculum is derived not from a structured, determined framework but rather from the defining characteristics of open relational systems, perturbations and disequilibrium, self-organization, chaotic order and lived experiences.

Doll (1993) suggests a 4R’s criteria for a post-modern curriculum thus:

- a. richness;
- b. recursion;
- c. relations; and
- d. rigor.

Richness refers to the depth and layers of teaching contents and multiple possibilities or interpretations of curriculum. Doll (1993) says that richness comes from openness and tentativeness of curriculum.

Recursion is the reflective interaction with the environment, others, a culture and with one’s own knowledge.

Relations refer to both pedagogical relations and cultural relations. Pedagogical relations are relations within the curriculum which involve the interactions between teachers and students and between participants and teaching materials. Cultural relations emphasize relations between the historical and cultural context.

Rigor is the conscious attempt to ferret out these assumptions, once we or others hold clear as well as negotiating passages between the assumptions, so the dialogue may be meaningful and transformative (Doll:1993:183).

On the other hand, Marsh and Willis (2007) classify curriculum theorists into three categories:

- a. prescriptive theorizers;
- b. descriptive theorizers;
- c. and critical-exploratory theorizers.

Prescriptive theorizers attempt to create models or frameworks for curriculum development that improve school practices. Ralph Tyler and Hilda Taba are members of this group.

Descriptive theorizers attempt to identify how curriculum development actually takes place, especially in school settings. The idea is to understand the various steps and procedures in curriculum development and the relationships among them. Decker Walker and Schwab are in this category.

Critical-Exploratory theorizers attempt to understand deficiencies in past practices of curriculum development and to replace them with more adequate practices, particularly by considering curriculum in the broadest possible intellectual and social contexts. Elliot Eisner and William Pinar are members of this group.

4. Types of curriculum theories

Like curriculum theorists, curriculum theories can be classified in many categories. Glatthorn et al (2006) identifies four categories of theories based on domains of inquiry.

These include:

a. Structure oriented theories

These are theories that are primarily concerned with analyzing the elements of curriculum and their relationships. They are of descriptive and explanatory intent. Structure oriented theories examine questions related to: What does the term curriculum mean? What influences curriculum decision making process? What are the components of a curriculum? What principles govern the process of content selection, organization, and sequencing?

b. Value oriented theories

These are primarily concerned with analyzing the values and assumptions of curriculum makers and their products. They tend to be critical in nature. Value oriented theories are engaged in what might be termed as “educational consciousness-raising”. They raise questions related to how schools liberate individuals, how schools prepare learners to take up roles in the society and what constitutes legitimate knowledge.

c. Content oriented theories

They are primarily concerned with determining content selection and organization. They tend to be prescriptive in nature. Most curriculum scholars agree on three major sources of curriculum content: (i) The learner (as in child-centered curriculum); (ii) The society (as in society-centered curriculum); and (iii) The knowledge/subject matter (as in knowledge centered curriculum).

d. Process oriented theories

They are primarily concerned with describing and recommending how curricula are developed. Some process-oriented theories are descriptive in nature; others are prescriptive. The process-oriented theories provide guidelines on an effective curriculum development process such as Tyler's model, Taba's Model and Oliva's model.

Other scholars, Ornstein & Hunkins (1998) suggest two major categories of curriculum theories:

- a. Design theories which address the basic organization of the curriculum plan; and
- b. Engineering theories that explain describe, predict or even guide curriculum development activities. They involve specific plans, principles, and/or methods or procedures.

The discussion in this section reveals many categories of curriculum theories as advanced by many curriculum scholars.

4.1 Professional value of curriculum theory

Curriculum theorizing is a process that engages us in imagining the why and how of curriculum phenomena. It challenges us to analyze why we think a curriculum should be developed in a particular way for particular students and focused on certain content (Syomwene, 2017). Curriculum theory is important in the following ways:

First, curriculum theory provides a framework with which to design the curriculum. Curriculum planners rely on curriculum theories and models when stating the curriculum objectives, selecting and organizing the content and learning experiences as well as the methods of evaluation. Tyler's (1949) and Taba's (1962) models of curriculum development are very useful in the process of curriculum design.

Second, curriculum theory empowers teachers for quality outcomes in curriculum implementation process. Quality curriculum implementation activities are invaluable in effective schools (Syomwene, 2018). Curriculum implementers draw on theories in their pursuit of effective implementation activities such as planning for instruction, actual teaching, motivation of learners, and assessment.

Third, teachers rely on theory in research about the school curriculum. Forth, educational supervisors and leaders rely on theory in their curriculum supervisory duties. Fifth, curriculum theory is essential in the development and implementation of curriculum changes and innovations.

5. Conclusion

This paper has delved on a discussion on curriculum theory. We note that in real sense, curriculum theories will continue to emerge because science and the field of curriculum in particular is fluid in nature. Henson (2001) warns that no curriculum theory can be perfect, and no curriculum model can be totally adequate until a satisfactory theory of education has been developed. Despite these sentiments, this paper holds that teachers and educators can make use of the available theories in research and other curriculum activities for quality educational purposes.

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