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A Review of Literature on Research Approaches to 'Curriculum'

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ABSTRACT

The curriculum, itself being a multidimensional concept, leaves scope for various ways of investigation on the associated issues at multiple levels. This review describes various research approaches that can take place in an attempt of research on the curriculum. They may adhere to any of the different aspects of 'curriculum' ranging from the simple documented & planned curriculum to the complex experience of the curriculum by the learners. Rather than taking the curriculum as an object of study, the curriculum researches may also take it as the medium to evaluate the role of the developing authority.

Keywords : Curriculum, Curriculum Research, Critical approach

Curriculum is the most common concept used in any educational set up, yet the most complex one. It is, perhaps, best thought of as that set of planned activities which are designed to implement a particular educational aim- set of such aims - in terms of the content of what is to be taught and the knowledge, skills and attitudes which are to be deliberately fostered, together with statements of criteria for selection of content, and choices in methods, materials and evaluation". Understanding the concept of curriculum can be approached through various ways. One way of looking at this is from the research approaches commonly used to explore it. The curriculum concept is complex and multilayered; to establish a research approach or a research paradigm for this is not a simple task. Like other educational research, curriculum research can be classified by distinctive paradigms.

Rudramamba (2004, p.56) classified Curriculum research according to areas of study into the following categories: situation analytic (including surveys and status studies concerning the existing curriculum and prevalent socio-economic condition in the society), foundational (covering theories, principles of curriculum, curriculum objectives and their sources, model and dynamics development, history of curriculum development, philosophical, psychological and sociological bases of curriculum etc.), curriculum materials (covering mechanism of development of textbook, workbook, teaching aids etc.), operational (covering implementation of curriculum in school system, models, strategies and techniques of teaching) and evaluative (involving evaluation of general curriculum & curriculum materials to provide feedback for modification to the curriculum developers).

Following Posner's (1998) argument, there can be three categories of approaches as per the focus of research in the area of curriculum. They are the procedural, focussing on the steps taken in the planning process; the descriptive, concentrating on the decision–making processes and on the steps actually taken by curriculum planners; and the conceptual approach focussing on understanding the elements of curriculum planning and their relation to one another.

Squires' work (1990) exemplified the conceptual approach where he set up a framework for an analytical analysis of the curriculum concept.

There is a well known story of some blind people, describing an elephant which were incomplete and contradictory as they all have touched just a part of the huge animal. The curriculum is also such a concept that can be touched upon from various sides. The complexity of the curriculum concept actually rises from its multilevel 'nature' (Goodlad and associates, 1984). Curriculum can thus include studies at the micro level of the classroom as well as at the macro level of the institution or society. Goodlad and associates (Goodlad, 1984) proposed five different curricula, operating at different levels. They are the ideal curriculum, for which proponents are competing for power within a particular society; the formal curriculum, documented in the form of syllabi and policies; the perceived curriculum which the teachers or academics perceive to be; the operational curriculum what goes on in classroom in the form of teaching; and the experiential curriculum which the students experience in any learning situation. The idea of the curriculum encompasses various levels; at each level, various internal and external factors influence and shape the curriculum. A thorough model of the internal and external forces acting upon the higher education curriculum has been provided by Stark and Lattuca (Stark & Lattuca, 1997, 2000; Lattuca, 2004). In Shaping the College Curriculum, the authors argue that whether curriculum is understood at the course-level, the programme-level or the institutional-level, a variety of internal and external contexts and factors strongly influence the shape of what the authors referred to as 'academic plans'. According to them (Stark and Lattuca, 1997, p. 20), any academic plan (or curriculum) consists of seven elements (purposes, content, sequence, learners, instructional processes, instructional resources and assessment/ evaluation) that are or need to be addressed in the curriculum process as well as research.

Marsh and Willis (2007) claimed that there are three basic questions to be asked and these deal respectively with the planned curriculum, the enacted curriculum, and the experienced curriculum. The planned curriculum deals with the question of worthy knowledge; the enacted curriculum focuses on the process of deciding what the curriculum should be; and the experienced curriculum focuses on the curriculum as it should be experienced by the student.

Using similar notions, Barnett and Coate (2005) criticised the engineering sense of a curriculum that simplifies the complexity of the concept and pointed out the different levels of curriculum design. They distinguished between curricula designed in-advance and in-action stressing that the curriculum is always in process (Stenhouse, 1975 in Barnett and Coate,

2005), dynamic and a site of contested interpretations. Barnett and Coate (2005) demonstrated the need to look at the curriculum as a process that encompasses not only the pre-designed curriculum plans but how those plans are acted out through the pedagogy and the learner (p.51). Many other authors emphasising the process and the dynamics rather than structure of the curriculum have stressed the organic nature of the curriculum claiming that the educational experiences that take place can never be fully foreseen and planned (Eisner, 2000; Knight, 2001; Macdonald, 2003). The curriculum is thus an area where participants and spaces come together in a dynamic curriculum complexity.

An analytical, social and dynamic notion of the curriculum concept can also be found in the work of Basil Bernstein (2000). Bernstein (2000) saw formal education as embracing the aim, goals and content of a given field of knowledge, the way the knowledge is transmitted or enacted upon (the pedagogy) and how those experiences are assessed and evaluated.

Ornstein and Hunkins (2004) claimed that an individual's approach to curriculum reflects the persona's view of the world, including what the persona perceives as reality, the values he or she deems important, and the amount of knowledge he or she possesses (p.2).

They then proceed to list six different approaches (texts or discourses) to the curriculum: behavioural approach, managerial approach, system approach, academic approach, humanistic approach and reconceptualist approach, where the first three can be classified as technical or scientific and the latter ones as non-technical or nonscientific (Ornstein and Hunkins, 2004, p.2). This terminology is comparable to the well-known classification of research paradigms in social sciences derived from Thomas Kuhn (1977). On a similar note,

Pinar et al. (1996), in an extensive overview of the curriculum theoretical field, claimed that while the paradigm of the traditional curriculum field was curriculum development it has been reconceptualized in the contemporary field which is directed towards understanding curriculum in the sense of verstehen (to understand). The contemporary field is a complex one and Pinar suggested that the complexity of the curriculum concept is best understood by seeing its theorizing as consisting of different texts or discourses (Pinar et al., 1996).

Research distinction is often considered among the positivistic–empirical–'scientific' approach and the hermeneutics. The former is more concerned with natural sciences searching for universal laws and explanations through the objective study of the world. The hermeneutics is more concerned with subjective interpretation individual understanding and acceptance of multiple realities of the world where knowledge is best expressed by the Weberian term verstehen (to understand) (Schwandt, 1997). A third approach, a critical approach or paradigm, came from the Frankfurter school. It exposes the interests associated with various research paradigms. The critical theory believes that any research is in itself a political, and so, is critical of the social units giving privileges only to chosen some. Researchers following the critical approach claim that their research should be of benefit to empower the marginalised groups (McLaren, 1989). Qualitative researchers influenced by critical theory are interested in how social values get reproduced through pedagogical institutions (Weiler, 1988; Eisner, 1997).

Though curriculum is the centre of all the educational activities, the research exploring various aspects of it are still in infant stage in case of India. It needs to engage in more mature and wider approaches discussed above to produce greater impact on the educational endeavours in totality.

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