Toward a Multidimensional Concept of Curriculum: Understating Curriculum as Phenomenon, Field and Design

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Abstract
This paper makes and argument for a multidimensional concept of curriculum in order to understand curriculum as a phenomenon, field, and design process. A multidimensional concept of curriculum acknowledges the complexity of curriculum as a phenomenon, recognizes the different perspectives in the field, and addresses the complexity of curriculum in the design process. Therefore, a multidimensional concept of curriculum as a phenomenon can also be used as a research program as well as a set of variables to be considered in curriculum design. The concept is presented as a theoretical tool to understand curriculum, develop knowledge about it, and inform design. Thus, it intends to connect theory, research, and curricular practice by looking at the field's history and asking what remains in this.

Keywords: multidimensional curriculum, curriculum field, curriculum phenomenon, curriculum design.

Introduction
Asking “What is curriculum?” is probably one of the most frequent ways to start an undergraduate or graduate curriculum course. The question signals the problematic nature of curriculum since its very beginning. Curriculum is a complex phenomenon. Curriculum is also an “interdisciplinary academic field devoted to understanding curriculum” (Pinar, 2011, p. ix). Curriculum also refers to the process of curriculum design through which the content of schooling is verified. This paper searches for a concept to understand curriculum as a phenomenon, a field, and a design process. Therefore, it recognizes the complexity of curriculum phenomenon, acknowledges the different perspectives in the field, and addresses the complexity of curriculum in the design process. This is not an attempt to surpassed perennial controversies but is an effort to develop a coherent perspective of curriculum by reflecting on the question of ‘What’s left in the field’, a question about which, according to Miller (2000), there is no definitive answer. In addition, it must be said that the context behind my endeavour is teacher education. Thinking about curriculum becomes even more complex when thinking about how to teach it to future teachers. It seems to me that at this level we cannot avoid assuming a pluralistic view of the field as its legacy, including the major gap between curriculum theory and curriculum development. In this regard, having teacher education in mind, we could or should address “unpacking curriculum controversies” (Cochran-Smith & Demers, 2008, p. 261) and deliberate about what remains in the field.
1. A complicated field

The question for what remains in the field is not an exclusive concern of teacher education or teacher educators. As a matter of fact it is an issue for the field itself. This unpacked controversy makes the field of curriculum a complex as well as controversial endeavour (Pacheco, 2012). Beginning in the second decade of the 21st Century, curriculum is a divergent field moving in different directions (Pinar, 2011). This is the weakness and strength of the field “that (supposedly) is there to help us think rigorously about what and whose knowledge is of most worth” (Apple, 2010, p. 100).

According to Pinar (2011) while the atheoretical feature of the curriculum field was overcome by the reconceptualization movement, its disturbing “lack of historical perspective” (Kliebard, 1977, p. 55) remains. As Pinar has argued, “‘Becoming historical’ restores the field’s historic concerns as historic” (Pinar, 2011, p. 111) connecting us with our legacy. Therefore, looking inward in the field would make possible “finding some common cause and common understanding across our vast landscape of difference” (Hlebowitsh, 2009, p. 15). Furthermore, Shubert (2010) has suggested that there is a “tension between the expansion of curriculum ideas and the need to summarize them for dissemination”, then these “expansive and synoptic dimensions of the field complement one another” (p.18). If so, in this synoptic construction, curriculum studies should be understood as curriculum theory but also as curriculum design, incorporating the legacy of curriculum as curriculum development. In that sense, Grimmett and Halvorson (2010) have claimed that what was missing in the process of reconceptualization was “to re-conceptualize the process by which curriculum is created” (p. 241) failing to frame “the creation of non-technicist curriculum” (p. 242). As a result, curriculum design has remained under a technical or instrumental approach. The practice of developing/designing curriculum is part of schooling and curriculum reform remains a main component of every educational reform. Having these concerns as backstage, this paper addresses the challenge of developing a concept of curriculum to think of curriculum as a phenomenon, field, and design.

2. A complex phenomenon

Under the dominance of curriculum development, curriculum was defined as written or official curriculum. The word “written” emphasized the curriculum’s feature as a document, a document that regulates the content of schooling, shapes the school experience, and controls teachers’ work. This written document was conceived as a selective tradition that one generation passes through to the next. Curriculum was what student should learn at school. This narrow conceptualization of curriculum was called into question during the 1960’s. Life in Classrooms (Jackson, 1968) was probably the first text to explicitly affirm that what students learned at school was something more than just the official curriculum. Through schedules, routines, and school rituals students learned what Jackson named a ‘hidden curriculum.’ Ever since, different types of curriculum have been named, making curriculum a much more “complicated conversation” (Pinar, 1995).

In the 1970’s, Goodlad (Glatthorn et al., 2006) claimed that there were five different curricula: the “ideal curriculum”, compounded by recommendations of
scholars and experts in the field; the “formal curriculum”, compounded by the
documents that regulate the curriculum in a given level; the “perceived
curriculum”, the one that teacher thought they taught; the “operational
curriculum”, the curriculum that an outsider could see going on in a classroom;
and the “experiential curriculum”, the one which student learned. Each of these
curricula were rarely connected, which he perceived as a problem of
implementation and curriculum change. Unlike this conception, we will not
consider them as different entities but as dimensions of the same phenomenon.
They are dimensions of the complex phenomenon of curriculum, since all of
those “curricula” are part of the educational experiences. Before develop these
dimensions and its potential in thinking about curriculum as a phenomenon, field,
and design; I will address the definition of curriculum as a process of design.

3. The challenge of design

Having defined curriculum as a complex phenomenon, now it is the time to
connect this reflection to the problem of curriculum design. Curriculum
development has typically stressed the written dimension of curriculum as
prescription. The development of a curriculum is more or less a matter of
implementation taking place when the written curriculum has been formulated.
Under Tyler rationale, this process is a technical task that teachers should
address by developing what has already been decided and would be tested.
Bloom’s taxonomy was the perfect tool to accomplish that goal. This tool provided
an uncritical procedure in which teachers could develop curriculum by choosing a
series of verbs associated with different skill levels, formulating more and more
specific objectives, which would allow measuring those educational goals. In this
approach teachers were not curriculum makers (Connelly & Clandinin, 1991) but
technical developers of curriculum decisions already made by the designers of a
teacher proof curriculum.

However, written curriculum is a product of the struggle that Kliebard
asserted characterized the field, and a deliberative process of design and writing.
In this process, what and whose knowledge counts as valuable must be
answered. Thus, acknowledging the complexity of curriculum as a phenomenon,
curriculum design is conceived as a complicated decision making process that
has technical, practical and political implications. Technical because it seems
improbable that we can think of a school system without curriculum regulations,
guides, and other documents that shape teaching. Practical because
practitioners make decisions about desired, or not, effects of these curriculum
prescriptions, but also because there are aspects of the practical school world
that escape from and resist technical rationales. It is political because curriculum
constrains the world view or views to which students will be exposed as part of
their school experience.

Therefore, curriculum design should incorporate the field’s legacy while
moving from the idea of curriculum development to a conception of curriculum
design. This entails the expectation of linking curriculum theory and curriculum
design. Then, curriculum design should become also multidimensional. Thus
designing curriculum at national, state, district, school or classroom level, we
should include every dimension of the curriculum phenomenon such as the
written curriculum, the taught curriculum, the hidden curriculum, the learned
curriculum, and so on. All these dimensions should be included as a variable or set of variables in the deliberative process of decision-making. In design as a decision-making process, curriculum reaches school and classroom levels. In that process, a collective act of “educational imagination” (Eisner, 1979) takes place. Through this “educational imagination”, educational actors address the endeavour of enriching students’ school experience. In this sense, “curriculum theorists would do well to support curriculum development [design] while at the same time looking for new possibilities” (Null, 2008, p. 489). For this author, curriculum understanding and curriculum development are powerful contributors to curriculum and teaching.

4. A precarious multidimensional concept of curriculum

This multinational concept is precarious because of the stage of its development but also to remind us that every conceptualization opens a space of meaning, while closing others. Then, a precarious conceptualization does not include the whole curriculum phenomenon and accept its temporality. Being aware of this situation is essential in order to acknowledge the uncertainty, complexity, and unpredictability of practice. Therefore, curriculum as a multidimensional concept incorporates different aspects of the curriculum phenomenon that have emerged from the intellectual history of the field. The multidimensionality of curriculum has also been recognized by Shubert (2008), who has stated that the school curriculum “has intended, taught, embodied, hidden, tested, and null dimensions” (p. 410). Boostron (2008), on the other hand, has seen the organization of the Sage Handbook of Curriculum and Instruction (Connelly, He, & Phillion, 2008) as a conceptualization of the field of curriculum as transdimensional in moving from curriculum in Practice to curriculum in Theory.

Following, Glatthorn et al (2006), this multidimensional curriculum includes three aspects of curriculum that would be considered what he called the intended curriculum, including the written, the supported, the taught, and the tested. The written dimension implies the formulation and content of the written document that prescribes what should be taught at schools. It implies also a reflexion and deliberation of how openness and closure in this prescription must be in terms of extension, organization, and cultural diversity. The written dimension should include the national curriculum but also those written documents at state, district, and school levels.

The supported dimension composes all those aspects that make possible curriculum prescription. The supported dimension includes those aspects related with administration and resources at different levels. Among them, we can mention material resources such as buildings, classrooms, labs, and technology; but also human resources such as teachers, specialist, and administrators. It is curriculum as embodied in materials “in which the content is selected, organized, and transformed for social, cultural, educational, curricular, and pedagogical purposes” (Deng, 2011, p. 538). It is the result of the process by which scholarly materials are translated into curriculum materials. Glatthorn et al. (2006) mention textbooks as an important component of supported curriculum.

The taught dimension is the curriculum as is understood and put into practice by teachers. The taught dimension is composed for all those decisions
teachers made to prepare and perform their teaching. This is the curriculum actually delivered as well as reinvented by teachers. It entails the lesson planning process, the teaching performance, and more complex process of thinking that bring teachers to understand curriculum prescriptions in a certain way in a given context. As it has been said, “at some point, the design of the curriculum leaps off the paper and takes on a life in the school curriculum” (Hlebowitsh, 2009, p. 22).

The tested dimension has to do with the forms of evaluations that students are asked to take by their teachers, the school, the district, the state, the central government, and even by international organizations. These assessments try to evaluate how well the prescribed curriculum has been learned by students. However, these evaluations also teach what is considered important in the classroom, school, society, and the world.

All the dimensions developed above are parts of the educational intention; the explicitly intended dimensions of curriculum. Regardless, there are non-intended or at least non-explicit aspects of curriculum. Those aspects are conceptualized as a hidden dimension. Beyond the explicit educational intention is the hidden dimension of curriculum. This is what school teaches without teaching. Within the hidden dimension of curriculum there are socio-cultural and socio-economic variables such as social class, race, and gender; and organizational variables related to how schools arrange their schedules, their hierarchies, and rituals.

Finally, the learned or experienced curriculum dimension is a combination of the intended and the hidden curriculum. The learned curriculum is what students have actually learned in school. Thus, it is important to consider how different aspects of the intended and hidden curriculum affect what students learn and live in our schools. “The experienced curriculum expands attention to thoughts, meanings, and feelings of students as they encounter it” Schubert (2008, p. 409).

These dimensions inform a multidimensional concept of curriculum as a phenomenon. The come from an historical reflection on what remains in the field. Each of these dimensions also relay on the role of different actors in schooling: government (written curriculum); owners, administrators and publishing companies (supported curriculum); teachers (taught curriculum); teachers, government and assessment agencies (tested curriculum); students (learned curriculum). This multidimensional perspective could become, then, a program of research to understand curriculum locally, nationally, and globally. Therefore, it could provide a minimum knowledge of the curriculum phenomenon that everyone should be familiar with; and most important, the minimum of knowledge to be taught to the next generation of teachers, and to be part of the educational reflection on schooling by inservice teachers. Whether or not this minimum work has been done, in the way of curriculum typologies or a multidimensional approach it is a set of issues that every intellectual community should answer nationally and internationally.

Conclusion

An argument for a multidimensional concept of curriculum has been presented as a theoretical tool to understanding curriculum, to developing knowledge about it, and it informs a way of thinking about curriculum design.
Based on reflection about how the field of curriculum studies has changed by incorporating different dimensions to the concept of curriculum making it a layered or multidimensional concept. Each of these curriculum dimensions provides a better grasp of what curriculum is about as a phenomenon; it also can be a research program in the field of curriculum studies; and, it is certainly a set of variables that should be considered in any act of curriculum design at any level. The effort has been made in the search for an answer to what remains in this divergent field moving in several directions.

References


