



9-1-1978

Emerging foundations for curriculum theory

Paul R. Klohr
The Ohio State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/edconsiderations>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Klohr, Paul R. (1978) "Emerging foundations for curriculum theory," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 6: No. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1971>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Educational Considerations by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

There is evidence that the study of curriculum faces newly-recognized issues.

Emerging foundations for curriculum theory

by Paul R. Klohr
The Ohio State University

Futurologists who attempt to project alternative futures point to the possibility that our culture now faces a watershed situation that differs significantly from the past. Whether or not such a claim holds for all of culture or for education in general, there is increasing evidence that the study of curriculum as a subfield of education does, indeed, face newly-recognized foundational, or theory, issues. A concern with such issues calls for a re-examination of some of the judgments made in the last ten years that the field is either ahistorical, or dead, or both.

In some respects, the situation has in it the strong possibility of a paradigm shift in a Kuhnian sense. To understand what supports the assertion that such a shift might be taking place, we need to be aware of: (1) the state of the field of curriculum theory; (2) efforts underway to reconceptualize the field; and (3) the significance of these efforts for curriculum development in practical school situations.

In 1971, in an essay for the *Journal of Educational Research*, James Macdonald surveyed the field of curriculum theory and made a functional analysis of work then underway. Typically, the conventional wisdom of the field had been reviewed in a thematic approach. In contrast, Macdonald identified three groups of curriculum theorists in terms of the functions they assumed their efforts might serve.

The largest number of individuals, by far, viewed their work as guiding practical curriculum development activities by prescribing directions such activities should take. Most curriculum textbooks, elementary and secondary, rest on this interpretation of an appropriate theoretical foundation. The widely used Tyler rationale is an example of this approach. Tyler raises four questions: What are the purposes of the school? What educational experiences can be provided to attain these purposes?

How can educational experiences be most effectively organized? How can we evaluate? Tyler and others who use this approach commonly draw on three foundational sources: the nature of the individual; the nature of society; and the nature of knowledge. A diagnosis of needs to arrive at the answer to the question of purposes analyzes data from these sources.

There are many modifications of this mode of theorizing, but in general, it leads to a rather clear-cut set of steps to be followed. The historical roots of this approach, as Kliebard has pointed out, run deeply into the curriculum development processes projected by Bobbitt and Charters in the early 1900's. Fortunately for curriculum as a field of study, thoughtful criticism of this mode of curriculum theorizing has developed. The major point of the criticism is that the approach is fundamentally grounded in a technological rationale that is neither philosophical nor scientific. Nevertheless, any survey of the state of the field would still show this to be the dominant approach. In practice, it tends to raise a series of "how" questions. For example, practitioners who commonly enroll in a graduate course in curriculum come to that field of study expecting to get rather specific answers to specific questions of how to do this or that in their classrooms. A cellular, "interchangeable parts" framework for curriculum is assumed. Cremin points out that historically this framework dates from the period following the Civil War.

A second, much smaller group of individuals Macdonald views as scientific curriculum theorists. This group follows the canons of science. In Macdonald's words: "The purpose of this theory is primarily conceptual in nature, and research would be utilized for empirical validation of curriculum variables and relationships."

Among the individuals who might be viewed as functioning in this way are Mauritz Johnson, George Beauchamp and Decker Walker. At The Ohio State University, Jack Frymier, James K. Duncan and John Hough work with a basic scientific model for curriculum and instruction. Frymier's efforts with the Annehurst School² to develop a curriculum classification system is a good example of these individuals at work.

Finally, Macdonald calls attention to a third even smaller group of theorists—namely, those who "look upon the task of theorizing as a creative intellectual task which they maintain should be neither used as a basis for prescription or as an empirically testable set of principles and relationships."³

The interest of these individuals is to view curriculum phenomena in new and different ways with the expectation that such alternative perspectives will raise fresh sets of questions. In effect, they demonstrate what Dwayne Huebner has called attention to many times: the fact that theorizing in a mature field ought to reflect a range of different modes of inquiry. However, the influence of this view, although significant, is not widespread for there is still a predominant myth. This myth holds that many of the fields drawing on the social sciences—the study of curriculum for one—are passing through a kind of Dark Age, and that if we keep working hard to become "more scientific," we shall emerge with a clear-cut set of laws that meet the criteria of physical science. All phenomena may then be quantified with more highly sophisticated measures.

This brief overview might lead one to believe that the curriculum theory field is largely constrained by con-

ventional approaches to theorizing drawing upon traditional conceptions of foundations. Such a view might be warranted were it not for some promising developments which do, indeed, suggest the possibility of a paradigm shift. In the view of some, these developments constitute significant breakthroughs. If there is to be a genuine shift, it is likely to come from the efforts of those Macdonald has placed in the third category.

Reconceptualizations of the Field

Chief among the efforts that have the potential for a basic paradigm shift has been a series of curriculum theory conferences and a curriculum journal devoted to curriculum theorizing to be published in the autumn of 1978. Involved in these is a loosely-knit group of individuals who have been called the Reconceptualists. Whether or not that term continues to be used is of little importance. One is reminded of Peter Schrag's use of the "New Romantic Critics" to describe certain of the critics of education in 1968 who had certain ideas in common despite their diversity. McNeil simply divides the current field into "hard curricularists" and "soft curricularists."⁴ But this two-fold categorization seems overly simplistic, overlooking some significant distinctions among the individual theorists. Whatever else is associated with the term reconceptualist, it seems clear that these individuals intend to work in the third realm that Macdonald identified—namely, individuals who conceive of curriculum theory development as a creative intellectual task with no attempt initially to make a direct relationship to practice.

The Reconceptualists, it should be noted, have no formal organization as a group, and in 1978, there is rather wide diversity among them. However, one can trace some of the events which have influenced their work. Such a tracing might well start with the Rochester Conference of 1973. One might also note some beginnings in the Radical Caucus of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development several years prior to 1973. At Rochester, James Macdonald, Maxine Greene, and Dwayne Huebner gave papers along with several other relative newcomers to the field. These papers were collected and published under the title **Heightened Consciousness, Cultural Revolution, and Curriculum Theory** (McCutchan, 1974) which had also served as the theme of the conference. William Pinar, who called the conference at The University of Rochester, served as editor of the publication. He spoke of this work as a "reconceptualization" of the field and viewed the efforts as an example of Macdonald's third group of theorists.

The following year, 1974, Riordan invited those who had been at Rochester to participate in a follow-up conference at Xavier University in Cincinnati. A number of the Rochester Conference participants again presented papers, among them, Macdonald, Greene, Huebner and Pinar. Michael Apple of the University of Wisconsin also gave his views, making public a divergent approach which had been identified at Rochester but not fully developed. For example, the papers by Donald Batemen and William Pilder anticipate Apple's stance.

Also in 1974, Pinar edited a collection of essays titled **Curriculum Theorizing: The Reconceptualists** which included works by Macdonald, Greene, Huebner and Apple as well as pieces by Kliebard, Cremin, Phenix and Mooney. Pinar recognized the divergence of views that had developed more fully since the Rochester and the Xavier conferences. In his organization of the book, he

identified "political and methodological criticism" and "post critical" theory efforts. The autobiographical prefaces to the pieces written by Apple, Mann and Molnar also reflect a division. The question of which is critical and which is post-critical is not, in itself, significant at this stage.

The divergence is even more strongly underscored in the 1975 Yearbook of ASCD, edited by Macdonald and Zaret, **Schools in Search of Meaning** in which the editors write: "We felt we must call attention to political freedom, not simply existential freedom."⁵ The content of the Yearbook underscores a conviction that most curriculum theorizing has "backed out" of significant political implications. Pushed all the way, this issue turns up to be one of the individual vs. the collective.

Additional conferences were held in 1975 at University of Virginia, chaired by Charles Beegle, and the following year at University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee with Alex Molnar as chairman. In the autumn of 1977, Kent State University hosted a theory conference followed in the spring of 1978 by yet another at the Rochester Institute of Technology. In this latter conference, a special effort was made to refocus on some of the issues raised initially at the 1973 Rochester Conference.

As one reflects on these conferences and reads the papers presented, it would be easy to assume that a split is inevitable among those in Macdonald's third category, or in Pinar's terms, the Reconceptualists. Certainly, the 1975 ASCD Yearbook suggests such a split. In the realm of metatheory, the split often turns up to be one between the phenomenological mode of inquiry and critical inquiry that draws heavily on Marxian or Neo-Marxian ideology.

It is too early to know what will be the eventual outcome, but for this writer, two individuals seem to posit an alternative to such a split: Theodore Roszak and Richard J. Bernstein. Both transcend the dualisms that characterize those caught up in polarized positions. It is beyond the scope of this writing to explicate in detail the alternative metatheory of their respective positions. However, some aspects that undergird what might be viewed as promising "emerging foundations" for curriculum theory can be sketched. These seem not to distort the basic tenets of those who take differing positions within the Reconceptualist group.

An Alternative Metatheoretical Base

Theodore Roszak's identification of a third tradition which he calls "the personal" suggests something of the direction a resolution to the issue might take. He posits this in contrast to the "individual" and the "collective" traditions. This tradition, he asserts, draws on the thinking of Berdyaev and Mounier in Europe and men like Dwight Macdonald in America. He cites Macdonald's essay "The Root is Man" as a good example of the expression of Personalist values.

Rozsak stresses the significance of this theoretical stance in rejecting the materialistic dialectics of Marx and the equally encapsulating constraints of a capitalistic culture. He views as crucial the fact that this view has not crystallized into a systematic ideology:

Rather, they set themselves the task of being the Socratic conscience of revolutionary politics, a stubborn ethical sensibility that applied itself to all systems, all ideologies. The core of their political insight was this: that moral sensitivity will always be

obliterated by a moral indignation that loses itself among masses and class identities.⁶

He develops, therefore, the idea of a mosaic of "situational groups" which are genuinely vehicles of "self discovery."

In this sense, the historian Roszak seems to support what Bernstein intends when he proposes a meta-theory that will cut-across the several modes we commonly posit, regardless of how we perceive them. He expresses the need this way:

What is required is a fundamental re-examination of the very categories by which we understand human action, and seek to relate theory to practice. The root issues concern the most basic questions about what human beings are, what they are in the process of becoming, and what they may yet become.⁷

If we take Roszak and Bernstein together, we can finally say with Bernstein that we are not confronted with exclusive choices: either empirical theory or interpretive theory or critical theory:

Rather, there is an internal dialectic in the restructuring of social and political theory: when we work through any one of these moments, we discover how the others are implicated. An adequate social and political theory must be **empirical**, **interpretative**, and **critical** (italics in original).⁸

If the individuals who are trying to reconceptualize the theory base for curriculum are to succeed, it seems clear some resolution of the issues which have arisen must be resolved. At this point, the proposals of Roszak and Bernstein offer a promise. But, one might ask, what does a possible resolution at the level of meta-theory have to do with curriculum—especially curriculum development in school situations? In this writer's view, it has much to do with a newly-emerging foundations base for

curriculum as a field of study. If such, indeed, can emerge, a fresh and different set of questions regarding curriculum will result. These questions will differ markedly from the curriculum questions the conventional empirically-oriented theorist or the philosophical analyst have raised. Such questions will undoubtedly have significance for the applications we attempt in curriculum development. Much would remain to be done to bridge the theory-practice gap, but the rationale underlying what is done would rest on a more rigorous and defensible foundation.

Footnotes

1. James B. Macdonald, "Curriculum Theory" in William Pinar, editor, **Curriculum Theorizing: The Reconceptualists**. Berkeley: McCutchan Publishing Corp., 1975, p. 6.
2. Jack Frymier, **Annehurst Curriculum Classification System**. West Lafayette, Indiana: Kappa Delta Pi Press, 1977.
3. *Idem*, Macdonald, p. 6.
4. John D. McNeil, **Curriculum: A Comprehensive Introduction**. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1977, pp. 314-317.
5. James B. Macdonald and Esther Zaret, editors. **Schools in Search of Meaning**, 1975 Yearbook of ASCD. Washington: ASCD, 1975, p. 4.
6. Theodore Roszak, "The Third Tradition: The Individual, The Collective, The Personal," **American Review**, Autumn, 1977, p. 71.
7. Richard J. Bernstein. **The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory**. New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1976, p. 227.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 235.