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Yes, We Have No Curriculum Theory: Response to Herbert Kliebard

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It was with great interest that I read Professor Kliebard's paper because its appearance happened to coincide with a professional identity crisis that has occurred for me periodically since I entered the curriculum field. This crisis stems, in part, from being caught in the familiar dilemma that develops from the dichotomy between theory and practice. One finds oneself choosing to be either a theorist or a practitioner. The consequence of this decision is that one can often feel a certain sense of incompleteness in what one is about. Within the context of most traditional disciplines, this is an easily understood state of affairs. Curriculum, on the other hand, is not a traditional discipline. While it is quite obviously a practical endeavor involving the construction of something called a curriculum, that part corresponding to theory in a traditional discipline is lacking in curriculum. Instead, much of what is entailed in curriculum rests on other (foundation) disciplines. That is, curriculum development is involved with questions based on ideas and assumptions
that have been extracted from such areas as philosophy, psychology, and sociology. In fact, as Professor Kliebard’s previous research has so convincingly argued, the origins of curriculum as a field of study can be traced to the borrowing of assumptions and methods from other fields and disciplines—most notably, business management and psychology (see Kliebard 1971).

This sense of discomfort is further compounded by the impression that these two aspects of the curriculum field do not seem to be related. To be sure, one can uncover implicit assumptions or some fuzzy rationale in a model curriculum, which appears to be related in some way to theoretical questions. But one can never be sure whether the assumptions and the rationale result from conscious and deliberate considerations, whether they were added as an afterthought, or whether they manifest some intuitive notion of what a curriculum should be. Often, it seems to me, there is one group in the curriculum field whose work appears to be concerned only with foundations. Such work can be characterized as analytical, critical, speculative, and historical. This work does not immediately (if at all) translate into working models of curriculum development. Correspondingly, there appears to be another group in the field, whose work is only practical in nature, in that it is concerned with the actual process of designing or developing curricula.¹

It would seem that, with a stronger theoretical foundation, perhaps this dichotomy could be resolved and the different aspects of the curriculum field united. However, since the field has been unable to develop a theory in almost sixty years of its existence, one begins to wonder if there is enough to curriculum to yield a theory. Consequently, it was with great interest that I read Professor Kliebard’s analysis. As was his previous work on historical and other issues in curriculum, this paper is a very clear and careful analytical treatment of the issues involved in an attempt to develop curriculum theory. If there can be such a thing as a curriculum theory, it will owe a great deal to the excellent and thoughtful scholarship represented in his paper. I say “if there can be a curriculum theory” because, although Professor Kliebard’s paper presents a very strong argument for such a possibility, there are still some aspects of his argument that trouble me, and I shall attempt here to explain them.

Theory Formation and Human Values

Part of Professor Kliebard’s analysis is that curriculum, like any area of human involvement, has its origins in man’s apparent tendency to organize his experiences, thoughts, and problems into some manageable form. In this process, theory functions either to provide organizing constructs by means of which different aspects of human experience can be arranged and understood, or to help us in making the various choices and decisions that are part of the human condition. In short, theories are formed as a result of man’s need to understand and explain his natural, social, and personal condition. Of course, theories represent relatively refined explanations and are usually more sophisticated than an ordinary, com-
monsense explanation. In addition, our day-to-day activities are grounded only marginally in a conscious understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of our activities. In the normal course of events, most people are socialized into the various theoretical frameworks which guide our lives. It is only when a theory's explanatory power breaks down that we reflect on the human, natural, or physical condition that it is supposed to explain.

That aspect of the human condition that involves curriculum has to do with man's attempts to determine how to educate his children. Viewed in this way, curriculum development then becomes a series of questions such as, "what should be taught? how should it be organized? how should it be taught? and to what segment of the population?" In a perfectly homogeneous society, these may be answered relatively easily. In a highly heterogeneous society, the problems become much more complex. Presumably, a theory of curriculum would enable one to resolve these complex questions and develop a workable curriculum. It is at this point that Professor Kliebard proposes to determine what sense of the word "theory" is appropriate for use in curriculum development. "Since the central questions of curriculum are normative ones in the sense that they involve choices among competing value options" the most appropriate sense of the word theory is "any more or less systematic analysis of a set of related concepts." In this way, a curriculum theory would "clarify what may initially be vague concepts, and thereby unpack the nature of the problems under consideration." A more encompassing definition of the word cannot be applied here, because the value questions central to the field cannot be answered through empirical verification as would occur in the case of a theory from the "positive sciences."

The example Kliebard uses to illustrate this sense of "theory" comes from the work of John Dewey. The "set of related concepts" derive from Dewey's analysis of the notion of recapitulation. Kliebard suggests that Dewey's interpretation provides us with a lens through which we can clarify the nature of the central questions of curriculum development. Briefly stated, it is Dewey's position that the curriculum should reconstruct the "progressive evolution of human knowledge from its origins in practical basic activity" to its current "abstract, highly refined, and systematically organized" form. This can be accomplished by taking only those elements within the child's experience "that offer some promise of leading on to an ever more refined and logical grasp of experience as embodied in the disciplines of knowledge." In this way, the curriculum "will be restoring knowledge which appears at first to be so remote and obscure back to its origins in human experience."

Overall, Dewey's theory of curriculum, the progressive organization of subject matter, is quite appealing. It has a certain plausibility that makes it ring true. While this may be so, the same fundamental question remains: does this theory satisfy the sense of the word "theory" previously indicated? Or does it still leave us with the same fundamental questions, this time once removed? Let me point out two areas that lead me to
believe that Dewey’s theory needs further refining before it can ade-
quately meet the needs of curriculum development.

In using the child’s crude experiences as a starting point to guide him
to the systematically organized experience of the human race, Dewey
implies that this is a “progressive” and, in some sense, orderly task. That
is, from the beginning of civilization to the present, man has system-
atically been able to build upon past experiences and consequently
refine his understanding of the world. Assuming for the moment that we
have decided what disciplines are appropriate for development in a
curriculum based on experience by opting for such areas as mathematics,
chemistry, English, and history, we must then ask whether the manner in
which these disciplines have evolved from human experience has been
systematic and progressive. It may be that the reconstructed logic and
history of their evolution are quite systematic and progressive but their
actual evolution could, in fact, be quite different (see Kaplan 1964). In
the physical sciences, at least, it has been argued that progress is not
evolutionary but revolutionary (Kuhn 1962). Instead of knowledge being
accumulated systematically by the gradual addition of new pieces of in-
formation, it seems that certain anomalies inevitably appear in accepted
explanations or theories. These anomalies serve gradually to indicate the
need to create new explanations or theories. These new explanations and
theories often completely undermine the validity both of previously
accepted explanations and of the knowledge they supported. Can this
process be authentically incorporated into Dewey’s notion of the progres-
sive organization of subject matter? Quite obviously, it would be very
difficult to determine how it could be done. At what stage in the organi-
ization of a child’s experience would this be developmentally and cogni-
tively appropriate? Could this aspect of how knowledge is developed be
sacrificed and still not distort the intended purpose of the theory?

This leads me to the second concern I have with respect to the pro-
gressive organization of subject matter. Put simply, how is the transition
from what Dewey calls occupations to subject matter or organized knowl-
dge to be achieved? It has never been quite clear how this was to
occur. Is the transition supposed to take place around the middle school
years? If it is to occur at a later time, what would the high school be like
with respect to its curricular organization? As it stands now, this transi-
tion is rather vague. The current model of progressive education—open
education—which we have imported from Great Britain (but which ex-
tends from Dewey’s notion of experientially based education) incorpo-
rates such a bland and distorted notion of experience that it is virtually
impossible for it to lead to refined or organized knowledge. For example,
in an open classroom one might observe a number of activities taking
place, such as a group of children making cookies. The children might
make very good cookies and it might lead to other activities (e.g., field
trips, baking bread, etc.), but how does one eventually go from experi-
ence to the disciplines of knowledge instead of from experience to ex-
perience? It may be that a perceptive teacher would be able to point out
that inherent in these activities are many of the basic elements of the formalized disciplines. While engaging in these projects, a child is actually dealing with mathematics, biology, chemistry, and a number of other areas. A teacher might even propose that the child is even developing an intuitive grasp of the process of these basic disciplines. But are these processes what an educated teacher is able to extract from the various experiences, or are they what the child is actually learning? Assume, for the moment, that the child is actually intuitively grasping numerous concepts and processes from his experiences; it does not necessarily mean that he will then be able to intuitively proceed on through ever more sophisticated concepts until he reaches a point of having a conscious awareness of the more refined disciplines. This is, of course, a problem with the British open-education model of progressive education. But what keeps Dewey’s notion of the progressive organization of subject matter from degenerating to the same process?

From this analysis of Dewey’s theory of curriculum, another sort of concern begins to emerge. To what extent does Dewey’s theory provide a lens for “shedding light on what may be initially vague concepts, and thereby, clarify the nature of the problem under consideration”? Since the central concerns of curriculum are actually value questions, a theory which could function in this manner would obviously be of considerable help. For example, a central concern of the curriculum field deals with the question of what should we teach. How does Dewey’s theory help us deal with this question? At first glance, one might say that it appears we should base teaching on those experiences related to the disciplines of knowledge. But what are the disciplines of knowledge? As Jonas Soltis’s (1968) analysis of this concept indicates, there are no clear-cut lines of demarcation which allow us to identify certain areas as “disciplines” and other areas as being experiences not related to proper subject matter. Basket weaving, flower arranging, and home economics, Soltis would argue, could fit virtually any definition of discipline we now have as well as history or chemistry. It is quite apparent, from the way his theory is organized, that Dewey considered only a certain class of experience as being worthy of attention. Viewing the theory within the general context of his work, it seems that when Dewey refers to disciplines of knowledge he is speaking of that class of experience which will lead to the traditional academic disciplines (Dewey 1938, pp. 73–88). Basket weaving or flower arranging might have an early role in the curriculum but their relationship to the disciplines would only be marginal, and only then to the extent that they could lead to more refined experiences. Within Dewey’s overall schema, for education to be worthwhile it would have to follow the pathways outlined by the refined forms of thought that exist in the twentieth century (i.e., chemistry, mathematics, history, biology, etc.). The notion of disciplines of knowledge is not as loose as it might appear at first glance. In this sense, Dewey’s theory does not clarify the nature of the problem under consideration. Rather, it resolves the problem. I personally find myself in agreement with Dewey’s interpretation.
but, as the recent trend towards increased vocational and career education indicates, not everyone would be so persuaded.

This same line of reasoning could be applied to some of the other central concerns of the field. In particular, the question of how the curriculum should respond to the differing capacities of different groups of students is very interesting. Does Dewey’s theory provide a lens that will clarify the nature of this problem, or does it implicitly resolve the problem? I suspect that the latter is the case. There is, inherent in the theory, the notion that the child’s crude, unsystematized experiences (which represent knowledge in an unrefined form) can be guided to the “highly refined and systematically organized experience of the human race.” In other words, one would presume that, except for extreme cases, the individual can be guided to understand and use his culture. The very notion of taking individual experience and using it as a starting point for organizing the curriculum makes the usual questions of intellectual capacity, curriculum differentiation, and grouping irrelevant. Again, as with the last curricular issue, I find the manner in which Dewey resolves this issue very appealing. On the other hand, those who believe that individual differences are important determinants of rate and capacity, and that there are significant differences within the general population, would not be as persuaded by this aspect of Dewey’s theory as I am.

The point I am trying to make here is that there are values implicit in any theory in the social sciences (see Farganis 1975). Can anyone take a theory, bracket the values implicit in it, and still use the theory effectively? I tend to think not. The implicit value considerations are what gives a particular theory meaning, and which also prevent it from operating as a neutral vehicle, allowing the examination of concerns which in turn are value-laden. I find this aspect of the use of theory in curriculum very problematic, and I tend to doubt whether there can ever be a curriculum theory. Consequently, I would like to offer an explanation as to why the field feels the need for a curriculum theory.

The Use of Theory in Applied Fields

The following analysis is, of course, based on what I hope is the shared assumption that curriculum is, in some sense, an applied field. In many respects the origins of curriculum are not unlike those of applied fields in other disciplines. For example, in psychology there are a number of applied fields (some have argued that they are technologies) such as educational psychology, clinical psychology, industrial psychology, and counseling psychology. One of the major differences between the origins of curriculum and those of other fields is that the latter have an easily identified “parent discipline,” while curriculum does not. In studying the resulting relationships between these applied fields and their parent disciplines, it appears that a breakdown in communication results. This is the familiar separation between theory and practice which I mentioned earlier. This is unfortunate since one would presume that, if a theory
evolves out of a human concern, and if an applied field is the attempt to resolve that concern, then there is a need to maintain communication.

What in fact does happen, though, is that the applied field soon develops its own communications network. Invisible colleges and journals are the most well known types of communications networks. Although the journal system in particular attempts to emulate that originally developed by the parent discipline, research has indicated that the information flow is independent of the parent discipline. In other words, information is between members of the field and does not draw upon the theoretical work of the parent discipline. The applied fields become their own source of information. This appears to be because the accumulation and transferal of information is secondary to the actual utilization of information and techniques. It seems that communication between the parent disciplines and applied fields happens only during the educational process.

The dialogue that does occur in journals of the applied fields is not quite the same as that which appears in the journals of their parent disciplines. A journal in an applied field, for instance, is usually more simple. The literature of the typical parent discipline, however, is usually written in a manner incomprehensible to the average practitioner. Since the practitioner has concentrated on his specialty, he is usually unable to comprehend more than a fraction of the information in the journals of the parent discipline. The only exception to this lack of communication, other than during the practitioner's graduate training, appears to be when an applied field advances to a limit, a point where understanding of the parent discipline is required. In this way, the applied field defines a problem for the parent discipline. When this problem is attacked and resolved by the theorists of the parent discipline, the solution is passed immediately into technology or into some other form of practice.

Another interesting aspect of the relationship between pure and applied fields is that, from time to time in newly emerging applied fields, an identity crisis concerned with their professional standing, status, and legitimacy can be seen to develop. In the literature of the applied fields, there will be a search for an identity that will give them legitimacy and status. This search usually takes the form of looking for theoretical underpinnings that will support and legitimatize their work. This process becomes quite interesting in the applied areas of applied fields. For example, there is an area of psychological counseling called rehabilitation counseling. Rehabilitation counseling is a relatively new field. The journals in this area have recently begun to publish articles calling for the development of a "theory" of rehabilitation counseling. Apparently, the general theories of counseling are inadequate. The suggested process for developing a theory of rehabilitation counseling is to take those aspects of theories from a variety of areas which are related to rehabilitation and put them together in some unique fashion.4
At this time I have the same feeling about the field of curriculum. We are a relatively new field and our sense of identity is certainly not helped by our attitude towards our history. (This, by the way, is another characteristic of many applied fields: they are reluctant to explore their past.) We also seem to be unable to answer some of our pressing problems. It appears that we need something to give our search for solutions a focus—a theory. It would be comforting to be able to say that curriculum has simply lost touch with its parent discipline. Unfortunately, there is no distinct parent discipline. Our assumptions and approaches have been borrowed from a number of fields. This process has continued to the present. That area of curriculum that interests me most, and which hopefully is also beneficial, involves research based on assumptions and approaches "borrowed" from sociology (sociology of knowledge, ethnomethodology) and from philosophy (critical social theory). The search for a theory may be an attempt to construct a parent discipline because we do not like having a number of foster parents. If there can be a parent discipline or a source for a theory of curriculum, my own bias causes me to lean in the direction of philosophy. It was Dewey who said "philosophy is the general theory of education." I suspect it is also the general theory of curriculum. Fortunately, we have the scholarship of men like Professor Kliebard to guide us in the construction of our field.

NOTES
1. If the majority of this work has any sort of theoretical underpinning, one would be compelled to say that it is the "Tyler rationale."
2. I would like to thank Barry M. Franklin for sharing this insight with me.
3. This conclusion and the discussion that follows draws on Marquis and Allen (1966).
4. The past three issues of the Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin would give one an excellent perspective on this point (1975, nos. 1, 2, and 3).

REFERENCES