Reconceptionalist Curriculum Thought: A Review of Recent Literature
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Reviews

Reconceptionalist Curriculum Thought: A Review of Recent Literature


Reviewed by Max van Manen, University of Alberta

The above publications are samples of the so-called reconceptualist literature. They represent attempts at reconceptualizing the field of curriculum inquiry. What is the meaning of reconceptualization? Periodically educators hear about the need for renewal and change in curriculum research and development efforts. But however well-phrased the arguments for renewal may have been, thus far they have been unable to set in motion genuine alternative research movements. Yet, within the larger field of the social sciences, of which education and curriculum are a part, it is evident that a new epistemological infrastructure is being created that reflects a contemporary consciousness for the emergence of alternative forms of inquiry. Scientific research currently is seen less as an undivided and stable enterprise. Instead there is a growing sense that the very concept of research has become subjective and somewhat arbitrary and that
the theories and concepts that guide it may be evanescent and unstable. True or not, this realization is deeply disturbing to many social science investigators. Those individuals who are in the vanguard of scientific renewal run the risk of incurring the wrath of their fellow scholars. Science only exists, the latter argue, where there is exactness and quantifiability. Readers may find their own reactions to the work of the reconceptualists as interesting or revealing as the nature of their work. Of this work, it may be said that it is here where the skeptic finds chaos and the committed further evidence that curriculum thinking has found its renaissance.

“The Reconceptualists” is the subtitle of a collection of writings edited by William Pinar in his book Curriculum Theorizing (1975). It is largely through this publication that Pinar managed to draw wider appeal and recognition for the special function of reconceptualizing the kinds of things that educators and specialists with an interest in curriculum development might do and think about. The book brings together work by educators such as Dwayne Huebner, James B. Macdonald, Michael Apple, Maxine Greene, John S. Mann, and others. Additional samples of the work of this group are contained in the edited volume by William Pinar, Heightened Consciousness, Cultural Revolution, and Curriculum Theory (1974); James B. Macdonald and Esther Zaret, Schools in Search of Meaning (1975); and William Pinar and Madeleine Grumet, Toward a Poor Curriculum (1976). The annual curriculum theory conferences (at Rochester in 1973, Xavier University 1974, University of Virginia 1975, University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee 1976, Kent State 1977, and Rochester 1978) have served to build a source of expanding curriculum literature that probably will acquire increased exposure through the efforts of a new journal: The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing, edited by William Pinar and Janet L. Miller.

The term “reconceptualists” derives from James Macdonald (1975a) who distinguishes among three purposes that theory development might serve in curriculum: a guiding function, a scientific function, and a function of reconceptualizing the field. Macdonald argues that most curriculum theorists are involved in providing guidance and prescriptive assistance to the field. They respond to the requests from educational practitioners for practical ideas that “work”: developing models, procedures, and techniques to assist teachers in devising, implementing, and evaluating innovative school programs, projects, etc. Macdonald further argues that another sizable group of curriculum theorists are engaged in pursuing scientific research on significant curriculum variables. These individuals are a step further removed from the practitioner. In their work there is a more exclusive focus on inquiry into what, for example, are the most significant variables that determine the success of local and system-wide applications of selected curricula and curriculum innovations on student achievement, teacher role change, cognitive processes, etc. A third and, according to Macdonald, much smaller group of educators seems to have set themselves the task of reconceiving the fundamental concerns, questions, and priorities that give character to the field of curriculum inquiry. Macdonald refers to this group of curriculum theorists as
“reconceptualists” even though their individual work may take very different directions.

William Pinar may be credited with helping the idea of reconceptualization in curriculum gain a broader recognition. Pinar has attempted to put the efforts of the reconceptualists into a larger historical context. In the introductory sections of *Heightened Consciousness* and of *Curriculum Theorizing*, as well as in his book *Toward a Poor Curriculum*, Pinar has chronicled the progress of reconceptualizing the curriculum field by reaching back to the 1947 University of Chicago conference and specifically to B. O. Smith’s call for a “new frame of acceptance” for curriculum theorizing; an orientation that is “adequate for the age.” Whereas the book *Curriculum Theorizing* contains articles also by individuals such as Lawrence A. Cremin and Herbert Kliebard, Pinar points out that the name “reconceptualists” stands more accurately for those persons (such as Apple, Mann, Huebner, Willis, and Macdonald) whose work he places into either a “critical” or “postcritical” stage. It is clear what Pinar means by “critical.” In “The Reconceptualization of Curriculum Studies,” a paper presented at AERA in 1977, Pinar sets the reconceptualizing function off against the thinking of traditionalism. “Traditionalists” are those who continue to be tied in to “the conventional wisdom of the field,” performing the instrumental-practical function of “service to the practitioners” (p. 1). Furthermore, Pinar notes how the science of curriculum movement, which evolved parallel to the traditionalist writings of Tyler, Taba, Saylor, and Alexander, has tended to embrace a way of conceiving curriculum issues that reflects an empiricist paradigm. Set against the traditionalists and empiricists, reconceptualization in curriculum “begins in fundamental critique of the field as it is,” says Pinar in his paper “What is the Reconceptualization?” (1978, p. 4). In this paper, Pinar relates reconceptualization in curriculum to the ideology critique and social critique of Michael Apple, to the historical critique of curriculum as science by Herbert Kliebard, to the aesthetic, philosophical critique of the dominant technological conceptions of curriculum by Dwayne Huebner, and to the psychoanalytically oriented critique of the experience of schooling by Pinar himself.

It is not quite clear what Pinar means with the less felicitous term “post-critical,” which is the label he employed in *Curriculum Theorizing* to point to the work that, according to Pinar, has progressed furthest along the line of reconceptualization. In his introduction to the chapter “Postcritical Reconceptualists” Pinar admits that the diversity of authors (Huebner, Macdonald, Greene, Phenix, Pilder, Murphy, Pinar, Willis, and Shuchat-Shaw) included in this section of *Curriculum Theorizing* “reveals the looseness of the category” (1975, p. 209). The postcritical reconceptualization of these authors shares the common element, according to Pinar, that it “tends to move past the critical function. . . . The heritage attached and discredited now begins to give way to an affirmative new conceptual order” (p. 209). Pinar also sees proof of the existence of a postcritical stage of reconceptualist theorizing in the selection of unconventional curriculum sources found in the disparate works of thinkers such as Jurgen Habermas, Hamden-Turner, Marcuse, R. D. Laing,
Sartre, and other authors in the existentialist and psychoanalytic tradi-
tions. For example, Pinar (1975) observes how “Macdonald argues for a
shift from the social sciences to the humanities as bases for curriculum
writing”; and how in the writings of Macdonald and also Huebner and
Apple “we find surfacing the work of Jurgen Habermas” (p. 210). Other
examples cited of the postcritical character of reconceptualist writing are
Pilder and Murphy who “introduce the radical psychological and
philosophical work of Hamden-Turner and Marcuse” (p. 210). Pilder’s
article “In Stillness Is the Dancing” is described as a “fine example of
postcritical curriculum scholarship. He has taken the conceptual tool of
existentialism and added the experiential” (p. 210). This is how Pinar
summarily characterizes the distinguishing element of postcritical recon-
ceptualism: “As I have suggested, this attempt to write out of one’s im-
mediate existential experience will characterize the curriculum field re-
conceived. The precise form this writing will take is still unknown but my
guess is that. . . . It will be consciously exploratory and experimental, in
the tradition of science, but its intellectual heritage lies in the humanities”
(p. 211). In Pinar’s introduction to the “Postcritical Reconceptualists,”
there are no further clarifications of the difference between critical and
postcritical thought. Therefore, the search for the distinguishing features
of reconceptualization possibly should be sought in other directions. In his
most recent writings on the meaning of reconceptualism, Pinar seems to
have dropped the notion of “postcritical” reconceptualizing. Now he re-
fers to the fact that authors associated with the reconceptualist literature
all find their sources for reconceptualization in continental and emerging
forms of social inquiry: “Marxism, existentialism, phenomenology,
psycho-analysis.” The essential feature of the reconceptualists is that their
“common bond in the context of the curriculum field is their dissimilarity
to the behaviorism and empiricism characteristic of American social sci-
ence and educational research” (Pinar 1978, p. 6). According to Pinar, it is
only from the vantage point of mainstream curriculum thinking that these
traditions appear related. “For those whose work constitutes the reconcep-
tualization, their relationships are unclear” (p. 6).

So it appears that if there is a singular theme running through the
writings of the reconceptualists, it is a distinct sense of discomfort with the
established paradigm or dominant framework in terms of which the field
of curriculum is being approached and interpreted. Borrowing or turning
to intellectual traditions fundamentally different from the dominant
North American paradigm is most readily visible in the sources and refer-
cences cited by the authors. They place common curriculum theories and
theorists in the context of continental proponents of hermeneutics,
phenomenology, and critical theory, as well as ethnomethodology,
phenomenological and analytic sociology, symbolic interactionism, and so
forth.

Shifting paradigms by borrowing from other traditions occurs deliber-
ately. When Macdonald (1975b) ventures a tentative exploration into the
Marxist tradition of the Frankfurter Schule, he announces his interest in
his newly found sources as follows:
During the past year I have discovered a book that might have been written specifically for me at this time; that is, it spoke to me as only a few books can in a lifetime... the book, by Jurgen Habermas is called Knowledge and Human Interest.... I feel that these [Habermas's] ideas could provide a basis for greatly improving our understanding of the problems of curriculum. [p. 286]

Similarly, when Huebner (1975) argues for a reconstruction of the way we think and talk about curriculum, he introduces his readers to sources not commonly found in curriculum writings.

I wish now to attend to what I have called hermeneutical activity, for therein I see a way of getting at a pedagogical method and interpreting what goes on in the classroom or other educational places. My source book is Palmer's book Hermeneutics, although my own introduction to hermeneutics is by way of Heidegger in his many writings, Ricoeur in his work on Freud, and Habermas' Knowledge and Human Interests. [p. 47]

Huebner, Macdonald, Pinar, and like-minded reconceptualists propose that we must attempt to suspend the technological means-ends, production model of current curriculum practice. Instead we must be sensitive to the idea of curriculum interpretation as the Verstehende analysis of the experiential life-world of the child and of pedagogic situations and experiences. Huebner (1974) refers to this attempt as the "Hermes process," a form of pedagogical inquiry that takes its cues from the interpretive method of hermeneutics (p. 48).

This interpretive method belongs to a different world of science indeed. Phenomenology and hermeneutics are modes of inquiry that require different forms of scholarship and training—more closely aligned to (but not the same as) philosophy and the arts than to strict science and statistics. Phrases such as "producing certain learning outcomes," "curriculum evaluation," "assessing the effectiveness of selected teaching methods or curriculum programs," "teacher competency training"—these are well-nigh antithetical to the very nature and purpose of phenomenological analysis. This is partly so because, from the point of view of phenomenological pedagogy, the child's potential for growth is always seen as open—subject to personal experiences, pursuits, choices, relevancies, and commitments. In contrast to the deterministic conceptions of behavioral or positivistic curriculum orientations, phenomenologists are less concerned about facts such as IQ, past achievement levels of a child, etc. They conceive of facticity only as the occasion for, not as the causality of, human behavior. People are addressed in a particular way by their factual situation, even though this facticity does not necessarily convey the significance of a correlational connection or causal influence.

Huebner, Macdonald, Pinar, and other reconceptualist authors invite us to venture into traditions of thinking that only recently have begun to open up in North American social science. Whereas Huebner, Macdonald, Pinar, Greene, and Apple appear well versed in these traditions, I think the idea of tradition and paradigm shift in curriculum theorizing can easily be oversimplified. I am not suggesting that the authors just cited
are guilty of such oversimplification. But the issue of paradigm shift should be raised since most of the reconceptualist authors make frequent and substantive use of phenomenological, hermeneutic, and critical theory sources. Using a different inquiry paradigm, such as phenomenology, is not as unproblematic as the metaphorical analogue of changing glasses. Sometimes different paradigms are simply seen as different “perspectives” or “models” (like “models of teaching”) that make you see things either this way or that way. For example, a direct consequence of exploring alternative paradigms (the positivistic against the phenomenological) is the perceived contrast between inner and outer aspects of curriculum data. Whereas the outer aspects are associated with the measurables, the behavior, the causal, and the objectifiable; the inner components refer to the experiential, the “lived,” or the existential meaning structures of the teaching–learning process. Yet, in order to shift paradigms—from the behavioral toward the phenomenological, for instance—one does not auspiciously straddle a fence, now using this paradigm and then that paradigm. Rather, the difference between using the behavioral and the phenomenological paradigm involves indeed a difficult step, requiring serious intellectual investments and moral commitments. I do not wish to overdramatize this point, but I think the metaphor for shifting paradigms more closely resembles the process of gaining membership in a different society, which has its own history, laws, rules, etc. The user of a phenomenological or critical theory paradigm becomes an initiate, a member of a community of scholars, which is steeped in knowledge, traditions, which has its own language, and its own view of the world, of education, and of the priorities of the field of curriculum studies.

A serious commitment to phenomenology as a source for curriculum thinking requires scholarship in the tradition of phenomenological inquiry. It means that such a curriculum person needs to be substantively familiar with the thoughts of individuals such as Husserl, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Merleau-Ponty, Strasser, Schutz, and others. Curriculum authors such as Maxine Greene, Dwayne Huebner and his students such as Michael Apple have easily demonstrated such scholarship in their writing. But for a budding graduate student of curriculum, this scholarship may prove a real stumbling block.

Critical theory as a source for curriculum reconceptualization requires a different sort of commitment than phenomenology. Critical theory in the sense in which Habermas uses the term (which Pinar found “surfacing” in the work of Macdonald and Apple) requires that one should adopt an active Marxist political-philosophical orientation. Michael Apple (1977), for example, seems to have made such an intellectual commitment: it is evident in his curriculum research, his writings, and in his professional involvements with political issues. The reconceptualist effort raises the question, however, about whether most curriculum authors who approvingly make use of Habermas’s scholarship in their writings are also prepared to make this political-intellectual commitment.

Closest to the task of ideology critique in curriculum and critique of
institutions has been the work of Michael Apple and also John Mann, James Macdonald, Esther Zaret, and Dwayne Huebner. This is especially true for the collection of writings in *Schools in Search of Meaning*. In here a conscious effort is made to articulate, theoretically and practically, how an educator who is committed to a "radical" principle of emancipation in schools and in everyday social life might pursue the ideal of a truly emancipatory pedagogy. By means of historical and social reflection on the tradition of curriculum theorizing and practice, ideology critique seeks to make us aware of the prevailing social prejudices and thus helps us to dispel the structures that sustain them. Like Ivan Illich, Paulo Freire, Michael Young, Samuel Bowles, and Herbert Gintis, these authors believe that a system of pedagogical principles always reflects an image of society. John Mann, Michael Apple, James Macdonald, and Dwayne Huebner recognize, therefore, that the practical problems of education should not be formulated only on the status quo level of a given set of societal conditions. While striving for an increasingly just and democratic society, education has to push itself off against those societal conditions that are repressive and alienating.

The authors of *Schools in Search of Meaning* stress that all educational processes are affected by political implications. Therefore, their critique of schooling is motivated by a radical critique of society—of social inequality, alienation, and the repressive and exploitative relationships that bind men to men: "the fundamental reasons for the shocking educational data do not lie in the children or in school practices per se—but in society" (Macdonald and Zaret 1975, p. 21). Liberating young people from authoritarianism and alienating curriculum structures, which serve the interest of existing class inequalities in the larger society rather than that of the children themselves, is the task of the emancipatory educator. Thus, curriculum critique becomes social critique.

It should be noted, however, that the educational process cannot be explained completely and adequately by referring only to its political components and implications. For example, there seems to exist a "natural" sort of inequality situated in every pedagogical relationship—an inequality which stands apart from capitalism and social stratification. In order to gain further insights into such issues, it must be recognized, I believe, that pedagogy or curriculum inquiry overlaps with social criticism but not entirely so. Another difficulty with the critical writings in *Schools in Search of Meaning* is the vagueness of the targets of criticism. Schools are seen as dehumanizing and repressive institutions, but it is not clear, concretely, wherein or in whose authority the repressiveness resides. Possibly this is the result of the absense of actual case studies, describing and documenting the mechanisms of the processes of domination and alienation leading to the present injustices in schools and society.

Huebner has argued for over a decade that the entire complex of pedagogical meanings generated in any concrete teaching–learning situation never can be separated from its biographical, societal, political, and historical situatedness. This concept of situatedness has been referred to with the idea of life–world; a term found in the work of Edmund Husserl,
Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Alfred Schutz. Every teaching–learning event represents the meaning characteristics of the life–world in which it is situated. Therefore, the first step of an educational analysis would be the reconstruction of life–worlds.

Pinar appears to have made a special attempt to contribute to our understanding of the significance of the biographical component of life–world, and how it relates to the concept of curriculum. The fundamental idea of curriculum, “stripped of video tape, audio tape, fancy books and buildings, values clarification and individualized instruction” is currere, according to Pinar (1976, p. vii). Currere refers to the original meaning of curriculum, “running a course”; and more generally it refers to all learning experiences that make up a person’s life history, the vitae. Pinar states that, therefore, his approach is autobiographical, focusing on subjective data and making repportorial use of literary style as well as phenomenological analysis of personal life history. The techniques that Pinar uses are derived from the method of “reflection upon one’s experience of self and world” and free association of ideas and emotions. “As curriculum theorists we look to autobiography for the roots of our theory” (Pinar 1976, p. 69). Pinar’s work may be seen as a synthesis of poetic, novelistic, and conventionally theoretical approaches to scholarly curriculum topics. As a result, his writing, which is intelligent, perceptive, and rich in metaphor and literary images, seems less strict than one is used to in scholarly and research literature. But it is not clear yet whether this literary infusion should be seen as a strength or a weakness of his work. I find Pinar’s work most deserving when it strives for a reflective clarification of pedagogical experiences. In chapter eight of Toward a Poor Curriculum, the work of Pinar and Madeleine Grumet moves closer to a pragmatic use of phenomenological method—even though phenomenological method may not have been their sole intention. This chapter, authored by Grumet, is a reflective essay of past experiences in the enterprise of running a teacher training seminar. It contains gems of insight that strike a responsive chord regarding the meaning and significance of selected pedagogical phenomena. That is how constituents of pedagogical experience are brought to reflective awareness—constituents such as “the beginning of it,” “the role of self-image,” “the dialogue,” etc. However, these experiential constituents are never really identified and analyzed. I think it is precisely to the extent that their writing remains prose rather than phenomenological analysis that causes it to suffer from lack of more fundamental practical insights.

It would appear that the majority of the twenty or so authors represented in the reconceptualist sources thus far have concentrated their best individual efforts on the task of ideology critique and critique of current educational thoughts and current curriculum practices. But the efforts of reconceptualizing the field of curriculum inquiry have not produced, as yet, a significant body of literature that is practical in a pragmatic or dialectic sense of the term. There is not enough in this work as of yet that actually shows us how you do something like phenomenological analysis or how you work for curriculum change in a critical theory sense.
Taking our clues from the work of European social scientists, phenomenology and critical theory appear to address two main tasks. On the one hand, there is the task of epistemological and social critique of the pervading positivism in the social sciences. The purpose is to save man from a utilitarian ideology of manipulation and technocratic control that is implicit in the dominant forms of knowledge produced by the behavioral social sciences. In this context, James Macdonald, William Pinar, Herbert Kliebard, Michael Apple, and Dwayne Hubeiner have developed powerful and perceptive arguments demonstrating the shortcomings of current curriculum theory, which teaches us a technological ideology of human management derived from scientific or behavioral learning theory and from effectiveness and efficiency studies of curriculum programs. And, on the other hand, critical theory and phenomenology offer methods and sources that should help us with the task of furthering our understanding of pedagogical situations through nonpositivistic analysis.

For example, various applications of ethnographic and ethnomethodological inquiry into classroom and school settings are closely aligned to the interpretive and Verstehende method of phenomenological research. Wolcott's (1973) ethnographic study of "The Man in the Principal's Office" is an example. Several curriculum-related studies have been reviewed in a recent article by Jon Magoon (1977). A more drastic reconceptualization could result from the work of ethnomethodologists such as Mehan (1973, 1974, 1975). Cicourel et al. (1974) make it their business to elucidate how taken-for-granted and seen-but-unnoticed rules lie at the basis of everyday communications and interactions between teachers and their pupils. For example, Mehan (1974) has shown how interpretive skills on the part of children are crucial but unrecognized (seen-but-unnoticed) requirements for the normal conduct of classroom lessons. Ethnomethodologists are able to demonstrate the existence of another kind of hidden curriculum. They show how teachers "unknowingly" make certain normative demands on their students, implicitly assuming that certain communicative competencies on the part of the pupils can be employed in standard classroom procedures such as lecturing, questioning, reading, testing, and achievement evaluation. Communicative competence and interpretive skills appear to depend upon unexplicated expectations (those regarding certain ways of talking and acting) being recognized by the students as appropriate rules for classroom interaction.

Another source for the reconceptualist effort might be sought in the literature of phenomenologically oriented educators in European countries such as Germany and the Netherlands. For example, in a paper presented at the 1978 annual AERA conference, Van Manen describes a phenomenological experiment in educational theory at the University of Utrecht. This work of Langeveld, Beets, and Buytendijk stands in close spiritual relation to the tradition of German pedagogic thinking, which finds its early inspiration in the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger and in the social philosophic thoughts of Dilthey, Schleiermacher, Bollnow, Litt and Flitner. The work of the Utrecht authors suggests that phenomenology can be a countervailing force against the increasingly
externalized experiences, drained of all subjectivity that dominates the contemporary field of curriculum inquiry. Not unlike the focus of Huebner and Pinar, the investigations of Langeveld, Beets, and others are systematic probings into the life-world of the child and the structures of pedagogic situations. Such investigations respond to the needs in curriculum inquiry for routes of access to an understanding of classrooms, schools, and learning activities as they are experienced by children, teachers, and parents for whom schools and curricula are natural components of everyday reality.

Phenomenological literature as exemplified in the writings of Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, or in the pedagogic works of educators such as Langeveld, Beets, or Buytendijk is a painstaking description and analysis of selected units of experiences in pedagogical phenomena. Moreover, Ricoeur reminds us that existential phenomenology never describes merely for the pleasure of describing—description is effective only in the service of a great plan: to denounce alienation, to rediscover the place of man in the world. If there is to be a coherent rationale underlying the work of the reconceptualists, then it may well serve the purpose of this great plan.

REFERENCES


Practical Constraints on the Enhancement of Curriculum


Reviewed by Gail McCutcheon, University of Virginia

Curriculum building and improvement require a curriculum worker who combines knowledge, skills, and common sense. Ronald Doll has prepared a book aimed at equipping practitioners with the comprehensive background necessary for curriculum work. It is an ambitious endeavor, but overall, it is uneven.

The book is excellent on several counts. It provides a brief, but reasonably thorough overview of the history of curriculum development. In Doll's view, "the history of curriculum planning can scarcely be written in a sequential order" (p. 17) because many procedures used in the past are still considered worthwhile, although other currently used procedures are considered to be unprofitable in sophisticated circles.

Doll's discussion of the important distinction between change and improvement leaves no doubt about his commitment to improvement. The remainder of the book contains helpful suggestions about topics such as leadership and the psychological foundations aimed at facilitating curriculum improvement. His lists of research findings and criteria for their application may provide assistance to novice curriculum workers.

Throughout the book, Doll reminds us of two important notions about curriculum building at the local level. He cautions us that it is: (a) extremely time-consuming and (b) an ongoing, never-ending process. At one point he says:

People who undertake curriculum improvement should not expect that great changes will necessarily occur within a period ... to themselves, to each other, and to the nature of the curriculum and its changes. Values, attitudes and skills change to some extent almost immediately, but progress of lasting significance takes times. [p. 315]
