REVITALIZING THE CORE CURRICULUM

MALCOLM SKILBECK, Deakin University

We have ideas yet that we haven't tried.

—ROBERT FROST, "Riders"

A wealth of thought, experience, and practices center on the concept of core curriculum. The scale and complexity of the issues associated with the core curriculum make comprehending and discussing the concept difficult. Although many people in education may vaguely understand the concept, many definitions have been set forth. In many places, educators tend to treat core curriculum as a descriptive concept referring in depth to the required minimum knowledge planned, designed, organized, taught, learned, and assessed during the entire period of compulsory schooling. I believe, however, that simply to define as the core curriculum what is expected of all students in the curriculum is to focus on an inadequate conception of core curriculum.

Because education has undergone an enormous expansion in the number of children going to school and in what is regarded as necessary school knowledge for all children, the problems of planning and developing the curriculum have become increasingly perplexing. In this context, the core curriculum has often been viewed as the part of the curriculum that is required of all children in common. Should the concept of core curriculum, now, be thought of as having virtually the same scope as the required curriculum, or should core curriculum refer to something uniquely different? This issue needs to be examined thoroughly.


2The term curriculum has undergone an interesting expansion, at least in Anglo-Saxon countries, to include the learning experiences provided by the school. Thus, distinguishing curriculum from the whole of school life is difficult. Note these definitions of curriculum.


• "the operational statement of a school’s goals"—Arthur W. Foshay and Lois A. Beillin,
TO WHAT DOES CORE REFER?

Core curriculum has several referents. First, the term is sometimes used to refer to subjects and topics within subjects that all students in a given system are required or expected to learn. This content-based definition is by far the most common. The core may be either the whole of the curriculum or a part of it, depending on whether provision is made for optional and specialized studies. The processes of planning and developing the core curriculum may therefore embrace the whole of the curriculum—often the case in the education of younger children. This usage rests on a superficial conception of core curriculum because it gives no sense of a particular orientation to the curriculum. Moreover, this usage focuses largely on content issues and therefore omits or plays down equally interesting questions about goals and objectives, learning experiences, learning environments, and learning outcomes. The same may be true of another common usage of the term core: the concepts, skills, and orientations considered the basic or fundamental parts of a single subject, such as science, that are required if a student is said to be doing science at all. Many subject specialists use core in this sense.

Despite these limitations, it is not unusual in the educational literature, especially that coming from ministries and government departments and sometimes from school prospectuses, to find the term core used to refer to required subject matter in one of these senses. This usage gives rise to different conceptions of the agendas for planning and development and of the nature of the tasks involved. Which usage is intended should be clarified when considering participant roles, especially those of teachers.

Another conception of core, which has been of more interest in educational theory, derives from attempts to establish some central unifying principle in the curriculum. The principle may relate to the organization and integration of knowledge (structure of knowledge), to social values and norms,
or to the processes of learning and understanding and therefore of the organization of teaching (pedagogy). The importance Dewey gave to science as a source of unifying principles in relation to intellectual, cultural, and social life is an example of the structure of knowledge. The theory of concentration, the associated psychological doctrine ofapperceptiae masses, and the pedagogical theory of steps of teaching—all from the Herbartian movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries—are examples of pedagogy. Mainly in the American literature of the 1940s to the 1960s—which modern curriculum planners and developers have mostly ignored—have these principles of organizing core curriculum been discussed and developed. There is now relatively little discussion of the interrelationship of these principles, reflecting both preoccupation with such foreground factors as the education-economy links and uncertainty in curriculum theory over the relationships between curriculum and pedagogy.

A consideration of planning and developing the core curriculum requires us to identify appropriate units or systems. Should the core curriculum be designed by the individual school or at the national-system level? Of course, the question is unduly simple. In School-Based Curriculum Development, I argue that there are good reasons, in the United Kingdom, for national-level authorities (not confined to the Department of Education and Science) to work cooperatively toward a national curriculum framework that would include a common set of aims and core of learning for all students. I also argue that the school has an equally important role in the practical definition of the core curriculum and that no contradiction need exist between a nationally defined framework, including a framework for the core curriculum, and a school-defined core curriculum. The recent trend in Britain, however, has been for the national authorities to dictate and direct, to the detriment of school roles. In practice, of course, much depends on the structures and mechanisms for collaboration and cooperating among the different agencies involved. There

---


are other interesting observations on related questions of authority and responsibility. As happened in some of the Canadian provinces and in the early phases of the moves in the 1970s in the United Kingdom toward core curriculum, an opposition developed between advocates of school-based curriculum development (including teachers' unions) and some elements in the central administration. Such opposition, if it continues, is a serious obstacle to curriculum-development work. In many educational systems, we need to focus attention and resources on collaborative and cooperative planning and development.

We must challenge the somewhat oversimplified distinction often drawn in the literature on curriculum and administration between centralized and decentralized structures for curriculum planning and decision making. Although highlighting actual and potential conflicts between grass-roots and centralized decision making is tempting, the polarization is unsatisfactory. On first consideration, core curriculum defined as a prescribed subject matter that is required to be taught by all teachers and learned by all students in a state-bounded educational system seems to contradict the concept of school autonomy in curriculum making. But this polarization assumes too narrow a view of curriculum, confusing core curriculum with required syllabus content.

Many educational systems, especially in developed countries, are structurally highly complex. Between the school and central authorities at the level of the nation-state we may have district, regional, and state authorities and agencies. We also have powerful voluntary bodies, such as professional associations and teachers' unions, parent groups, and employers and trade union organizations. Moreover, it is wrong to assume that, somehow, teachers are encapsulated in school-defined roles, while central administrators, planners, and developers are encapsulated in a distinct, different set of bureaucratic roles. Surely the time has come for us to abandon the centralized-decentralized dichotomy as an analytical device, useful as it may be for political and rhetorical purposes. The issue is how best to examine and evaluate complementary, or dislocated, roles and relationships. The core curriculum is a product of authority relationships—not a requirement (or an imposition) by one set of authorities that must be implemented (or resisted) by others.

THE CORE CURRICULUM AS A PLAN

One of the most striking characteristics to emerge from the study of curriculums is how often core curriculums are conceived in national systems as plans and proposals usually supported by ambitious and worthy general goals and objectives. Often these plans are embedded in political and administrative systems in such a way that we might be tempted to suppose that the

---

reality in school learning and teaching corresponds to the plans. For example, when a given educational system requires that all students between the ages, say, of 11 and 14 study science according to certain themes and topics, using certain textbooks and materials, for so many hours and weeks in the year, we suppose some corresponding reality in the classroom. No doubt the plans and the classroom experience correspond to some degree, but for several reasons we must question how completely.

The commonsense view of planning the core curriculum in a national system of education is (somewhat oversimplified) as follows:

1. Within a legally defined and administratively structured framework of action, a governmental decision is made about curriculum objectives, content-defined learnings, the allocation of teaching and material resources, ways of assessing students, and the evaluation of the curriculum's success.

2. Professional decisions (which usually precede as well as follow governmental decisions) give these broad governmental decisions depth and detail and can be described as a major element in carrying out the governmental decisions; administrators, inspectors, and professional curriculum developers translate the general plan into specific action programs, including curriculum designs.

3. Several intermediate-level decisions about planning and design as well as practical implementation may be made at regional and district levels.

4. Schools receive these plans and designs, they are provided with teaching staff and materials, and they carry out the plans according to the stated requirements and their own professional judgment.

5. Various measures, including inservice education and inspection, are adopted to ensure that the schools are acting appropriately and that the projected learnings are taking place.

I do not apologize for simplifying the analysis. My purpose is not to ring out the complexity of relationships among planning, designing, developing, implementing, and assessing or evaluating the core curriculum. Rather, I wish to emphasize a general planning problem—the difference between the core curriculum as planned and the core curriculum as experienced. This distinction is particularly important if we are to examine and discuss the core curriculum from the point of view of the democratic ideal of promoting equity, equality, and excellence in education. Leaving aside excellence for the moment, a core whose formulation, in planning and design terms, projects an image of equity and equality but whose realization in practice may well be different, must be questioned as a sound conception of core curriculum.

We are all familiar with a long line of research findings pointing to the failure (but not necessarily the inability) of public education systems in developed societies to bring about greater equality of access to further and higher education. Likewise, studies have shown just how unsuccessful the schools have been in achieving effective participation in the curriculum by substantial
minority groups. Despite the attempt to define core curriculum as a set of common learnings for the advantage of all, the experience of the core curriculum is one of unequal learning opportunities and outcomes.¹⁰

Is this outcome because the idea of core as some set or organization of common learnings is misconceived and that, as some argue, greater differentiation of the curriculum is required? I do not think so, nor do I subscribe to the pessimistic and conservative thesis that the research findings demonstrate the inability of the schools, following an ostensible core curriculum and operating along comprehensive lines, to achieve equity, equality, or excellence. But these findings do oblige us to address the question of the gap between a planned curriculum and an experienced curriculum. In the circumstances, it is unfortunate that some administrators and many members of the public still talk about curriculum as if it were a matter of stating aims and objectives and prescribing syllabuses of study. Apart from the lack of sophistication in such usages, they tend to draw attention away from the crucial question. What conditions are necessary to achieve and experience curriculum that fosters equity, equality, and excellence? This question must be the focus as we consider how to plan and design core curriculums because if we are unable to define these conditions concretely, we will continue to waste time and energy in paper planning and design exercises.

The question of conditions is analogous to one concerning curriculum-development projects, whether related to the core curriculum or not. Curriculum agencies around the world have devoted their resources and energies to producing highly professional course outlines, resources for teaching and learning, and formats for teacher development. These materials have been widely promoted, yet a substantial literature documents their limited take-up and highlights the so-called problem of dissemination.¹¹ This problem is a direct consequence of the way many curriculum developers have set about defining and analyzing the situations they aspire to change or modify. The gap between the plan and the practice in these cases corresponds to the gap between the nationally defined syllabus and the curriculum the learner experiences in the school.

Another way of addressing this issue is to ask educators, as the Schools Council for Curriculum and Examinations in England and Wales did some years ago, to reflect on the curriculum as a kind of residue of learning. What does the student “take” from the learning experience or the learning situa-


This question, of course, is not adequately answered by grades, test scores, and examination results, or even by vocational qualifications or profiles or records of achievement. The dilemma for the planner, designer, and developer of the core curriculum is that, although the plans and the designs envisage a broadly uniform set of learnings for all students, the experienced curriculum is personal, idiosyncratic, and in many ways inaccessible to teachers, assessors, examiners, and others who would use the outcomes of schooling. Paradoxically, we may need to plan and design curriculums that in some key respects are differentiated to achieve something approximating common, equitable, and equal learning experiences. Yet curriculum differentiation, at least as we have known it in the past through, for example, ability grouping, is not the way ahead.

How, then, are we to resolve the paradox? Where does excellence come in? The resolution in planning terms comes precisely through articulating, developing, and strengthening productive relationships between the different members of the curriculum system. But we have to work much more vigorously toward establishing a new kind of curriculum plan or design. For some time, I believed that the creation of a national curriculum framework in the United Kingdom was achieving this goal, but I am now more doubtful, although I certainly do not reject the possibility. That framework is defective both in terms of shared decision making and in its failure to envisage a future oriented core curriculum for all students. But many other educational systems are no better.

Much of the American-inspired discussion of excellence in education is little more than a thinly disguised attack on what are alleged to be declining standards of performance in the public or state schools. When governments, for various reasons, are seeking to reduce educational budgets, it is certainly convenient to substitute for interest in the quantitative expansion of education a much less costly interest in its quality. Especially in the United States, the focus on excellence is inspired partly by the fear of economic competition or of the success of another political system. Thus, the theme of excellence that educators have always regarded as intrinsic to the process of education (education as a form of qualitative change in individuals and society governed by values and standards and aspiring toward certain goals or ends) has been given political and economic interpretations that are proving difficult to reconcile with educational values. Therefore, a mixture of motives in the move toward a prescriptive core curriculum exists in many societies. The plans and designs are not always what they appear to be.


13This point is demonstrated in the debate over A Nation at Risk The Imperative for Educational Reform, The Report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983)
THE SCHOOL AS A DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

The problems of providing a satisfactory core curriculum for all students cannot be resolved through the established practice of producing and carrying out national-level plans and designs, with the schools treated as agencies of delivery or implementation. My argument is largely empirical: We know too much about unequal performances by students, the interference of social class and home-background variables, student dropout and failure (including massaged statistics, especially in relation to performance indicators), and the unsuitability of large parts of the academically defined core curriculum for the average student. Curriculum planners and even developers have given little attention to the difficult problem of determining appropriate ways of tailoring teaching and learning in the framework of the common core curriculum and in the context of the common or comprehensive school. This point is borne out in recent studies of basic schooling by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development and reflects a preoccupation, especially in Western Europe, with the social goals of education and more recently with its vocational and economic functions or disfunctions.¹⁴

I do not subscribe to the view that a psychological approach to the curriculum according to psychometric procedures and principles and leading to differentiated curriculums on the basis of test scores provides any sort of answer, but I do think that the planning and design processes have to be much better informed by psychological principles. Recent developments in cognitive science, including research on metacognition or self reflective learning strategies, are yet to be translated into general curriculum design. Thus, one point of refinement in planning and designing core curriculums is the systematic introduction of the analysis of learning into the designs themselves. Generally, the designs are dominated by a mixture of social goals and purposes as well as subject-based topics and themes.

How are we to make core curriculums more adaptive and responsive to individual and social needs? The question has several answers, but all of them require us to consider the role of the school as an agency for planning, designing, and carrying out the core curriculum. I accept the great difficulties confronting us if we are to take this point seriously. For example, we need to concurrently plan the curriculum, the school's organizational development, and programs of professional development. We must also question the school's capability to carry out these tasks.

If the school is to be a central site for curriculum development, the teachers must receive support for and become expert in curriculum development. However, teachers are not trained and recruited on that basis in

many societies, thus creating a particular challenge for inservice education. The point about organizational development takes us back to the concept of curriculum. Curriculum conceived as a plan or map of learning experiences and of the experiences themselves in the school setting underlines the importance of treating the school itself as part of the curriculum. Whatever its conceptual limitations, the term *hidden curriculum* is a useful reminder that we must bear in mind the experience of school life and not merely of classroom lessons in analyzing core curriculum in practice. The theorists Benne and Muntyan have pointed out that curriculum change is a change in the people concerned and their relations. This fundamental truth about social relations within the school has often been obscured in the curriculum-development movement by enthusiasm for attractive packages of classroom learning materials and guides for teachers.

Now we come to the argument that, desirable as it may be on theoretical grounds for the school to play a central part in curriculum development in partnership with external development agencies, parent groups, and state or national departments, this expectation is unrealistic. I quote from a school principal who wrote to me after listening to a talk I gave in England to a gathering of head teachers:

I think you’re right that curricular reconstruction must take place alongside organizational change and development. . . . Where I tend to disagree with you is in your assessment of schools as centres of appropriate knowledge and expertise. Most schools do contain many teachers who are knowledgeable and expert craftsmen, people who are deeply concerned with their subject areas and their ability at conveying knowledge to their students. Unfortunately that does not also mean that they are also capable of undertaking the sophistication of curricular/organizational reform—in fact, quite frequently the most “professional” classroom teacher is most resistant to concepts such as *curricular coherence, relevance, organizational structure*, etc.

The principal in question had worked for a national curriculum agency and so was not unfamiliar with or resistant to these concepts. His reference to craft is most interesting because curriculum development is itself a craft and we know that in the world of crafts there is, traditionally, a firm division of labor. Yet in their own views on their role, teachers do not by any means reject curriculum development either within or beyond the individual school.

The principal went on to say, optimistically, that he meant a *lack of capability*, not fundamental *resistance*, and that teachers, given the right circumstances, could move in the direction indicated. But it is by no means clear that educational systems in general see things this way. In some systems, in parts of the United States and in some European countries (e.g., French

---

16Simon Tong, personal communication
secondary schools), teachers may see themselves as contracted to instruct, not be part of an organic developmental agency interested in holistic curriculum planning, design, and development. It is not uncommon to find educational experts using the craft argument, that the field of curriculum is one of high professional specialization and that expecting large numbers of practicing teachers to enter would be unreasonable. Then again, governments may not see school-based curriculum development as cost-effective because it is usually accompanied by demands for reduced teacher-pupil contact and improved backup in resources and facilities. Finally, many teachers seem to prefer to use preplanned curriculums and commercially published materials that require relatively little adaptation or supplementation.

These difficulties are serious, but essentially they reflect a backward-looking stance and need challenging as part of the development and future planning of curriculum processes. The research on educational systems indicates many curriculum roles for schools, and in several systems a growing trend is evident. Of course, from a planning perspective, and as a policy question, we must address the question of whether school roles in relation to the core curriculum need to be definitely delimited in various ways. Although there are several reasons to think that they should and that there is some merit in a minimalist conception of school participation in curriculum making, there are good reasons to reject this easy way out. Most important is our understanding of the curriculum as a process of negotiation between teachers and learners in which accommodations are made and various interests, including those of the nation-state and its planning apparatus, are reconciled. Acceptance and understanding of the school's role in creating the core curriculum as a living experience for learners is part of the modern stock of professional curriculum knowledge. It is also politically and technologically naive to continue to subscribe to a traditional division of labor with a descending hierarchy of delivery and control. The issue, therefore, is how we are best to address the question of school roles and what tasks must be undertaken if these roles are to be adequately performed.

CONCLUSIONS: ORIENTATIONS TOWARD PLANNING

What are the crucial planning, design, and development tasks in relation to the core curriculum, keeping the role of the school centrally in mind? In addressing this question and in outlining these tasks, I am not, of course, seeking to produce a content model or a planning and design format. Plenty are available, and I have discussed them elsewhere in some detail. The tasks I have in mind are better described as orientations toward planning and

---

developing the core curriculum from a school perspective. Four orientations are interrelated:

1. building up teacher capability
2. treating curriculum planning and design as a process of review, evaluation, and development (the problem-solving school)
3. ensuring the participation of schools in development networks
4. maintaining the common school as the instrument of the core curriculum

Orientation 1

The letter from the principal was a reminder that even highly professional teachers may not be particularly conscious of the curriculum as a complex phenomenon for which they have some overall responsibility, they may not have any clear ideas on how to review and evaluate curriculums for purposes of development. There is a definite role here for curriculum-development agencies to become centrally involved in teachers’ professional development. Often, structural, resource, and administrative barriers exist within bureaucracies, and I do not suggest an exclusive role for the curriculum-development agencies. But I would like to see the inservice function of curriculum-development projects go well beyond familiarization and training to include attempts to incorporate some elements of continuing professional development focused on the creativity of the school. Likewise, much closer relations are needed between curriculum planning, design, and development groups and those responsible for initial teacher education.

Teacher-education institutions need to give more attention to theories of action in both initial and inservice education. Far too much time and energy have gone into debates about the nature of educational theory, and much teacher education is still defined through school subjects and their methods and the so-called disciplines of education. Curriculum theory, especially planning and design issues, gives us a way ahead. There is a growing volume of literature on the problem-solving school in the perspective of professional preparation and development that is directly relevant here.19

Orientation 2

The question of the school’s role in revitalizing the core curriculum is the second orientation. How much the core curriculum of the common school has been influenced, not to say molded, by a combination of the basic subjects in the traditional elementary school and a diluted form of the traditional academic secondary curriculum is evident from examining studies of present

19Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development: Project on International School Improvement (ISIP) reports are available from the project coordinator, P.Laderriere (Paris OECD), Wilfred Carr and Stephen Kemmis, Becoming Critical: Knowing Through Action Research (Gee long, Australia: Deakin University Press, 1983)
day schooling. Despite the most powerful critiques—for example, by Dewey in *Democracy and Education* and more recently by Her Majesty's Inspectorate in England and Wales—many countries have constructed the core curriculum of the common school on inadequate bases. By inadequate, I mean not well adjusted to the characteristics and needs of mass education or of contemporary society, and so many students reject the core curriculum.

Whatever schools may be able to do collectively, as individual units they are constrained by numerous pressures and demands, largely social. Still, we cannot be satisfied that, because of these pressures and constraints and because of the force of tradition in education and society, schools should largely replicate, reproduce, and transmit essentially an outmoded culture. Especially in the early to middle years of secondary education, a crisis exists, and that crisis has its center in curriculum structures and processes. Unaided, however, the schools will not be able to redefine the core curriculum adequately or to reconstruct their own procedures. National curriculum frameworks are needed, in particular, national curriculum-development agencies have the authority, the expertise, the responsibility, and the duty to initiate strategic analyses of the whole school curriculum, including reconstructed core curriculums. In the Australian Curriculum Development Centre, we made a limited attempt at these analyses. I do not claim that we succeeded, we were neither adventurous nor detailed enough, but at least we saw doing the analyses as our legitimate task.

**Orientation 3**

Schools must work with curriculum-development agencies, in developmental networks and consortia, and must see themselves as partners in curriculum planning and design, not merely as recipients of others' work. Many countries are concerned about gaps and hiatuses in education between primary and secondary schools and in the provision of different forms of education and training for the 14-18 age range. Some discontinuities require systemwide restructuring, others can be handled by interschool cooperation. Recent developments in technology and communications make collaborative work between schools much easier, and we no longer need to think of schools as part of a downward hierarchy from district, state, or national departments or as isolated entities, each pursuing its own purposes and interests.

**Orientation 4**

The common school is the fourth suggested orientation. Throughout Europe, in the postwar years, secondary education has been moving away

---


from a selective basis toward nonselective, common schools. The movement has not been uniform. In West Germany, the scale is small, in the Netherlands, major reforms are under way, in the Scandinavian countries, common schools are the norm. Although there are many criticisms, especially from the political Right, the principle of the common school has gained a large measure of acceptance. From a curriculum standpoint, I have argued elsewhere that talking about a common core curriculum is meaningless if we do not have a common school. Abridgments to the common school are also abridgments to the common core curriculum. The relationship between the school and the curriculum is organic, not merely adventitious—thus my rejection of the whole idea of the core curriculum as an externally conceived plan and design, with the school as a recipient and delivery agent.

We may be tempted, however, to take the publicly funded universal or common school too much for granted. The lesson of history is that we can never take social institutions for granted and that either they evolve and adapt or they disappear. There is no reason to suppose that the publicly provided common school must of necessity remain (or become) the primary vehicle of education in society. Developments in technology and communications, when combined with other forms of social change and radical views on financing education, can provide us with an alternative scenario to mass institutionalized education. The core curriculum, as it has evolved in many societies, may be thought of as a means of occupying one of the big spaces in the school as an institution—the timetable. The core curriculum also fulfills another need that has a basis in a social construct—the trained expertise of a professional functionary, the teacher. Therefore, neither the core curriculum, as commonly understood, nor the institution of the school can be considered a given. The organic relationship between school and curriculum is evolving, and our understanding of school is likely to change dramatically in the years ahead.

The core curriculum as conceived as a set of experiences, transactions, and negotiations between and among groups of younger and older people lends itself to various institutional and organizational formulations. The common or comprehensive school is a convenient and valuable instrument for delivering the core curriculum. But the common school is increasingly under question, primarily because of dissatisfaction with its outcomes, its resource requirements, and its efficiency. Therefore, the discussion of planning and developing the core curriculum must move on to these wider contextual and policy matters. We who support both the common school and the principle

---


of a revitalized core curriculum for the common school, with the school playing a central role in its own reconstruction, must be ready to take the discussion forward.\textsuperscript{24}

MALCOLM SKILBECK is Vice Chancellor, Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria 3217, Australia.


Gentile first reviews research related to Hunter's essential elements of instruction as a continual decision-making process: selecting objectives at the correct level of difficulty, teaching to those objectives, monitoring student progress and adjusting teaching, and using principles of learning. He shows that in most cases the accumulated psychological research supports these elements. Gentile examines Hunter's model of clinical supervision and evaluates critics' arguments. He concludes that those who have reduced Hunter's model to a specific four-element teaching technique and have used the model as a normative standard for viewing teaching have no grounds for doing so. Hunter's model is recapped and construed as a theory of teacher decision making that can sustain various techniques rather than a single monolithic formula for good teaching.


This collection of 17 original articles covers curriculum history and contemporary realities, planning and knowledge selection, workplace constraints and technology, and curriculum evaluation. Progressive and critical perspectives are apparent in the work of Kliebard, Teitelbaum, Sirotnik, Posner, Carlson, Steedman, Barone, Wood, McCutcheon, Freedman, Noble, Striebel, Willis, and the editors.

—Richard W Grove

\textsuperscript{24}This article is based on a paper presented at Enschede, Netherlands, at an international conference on core curriculum in November 1985, organized by the Dutch National Institute for Curriculum Development