

PHILOSOPHICAL THEORIES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Curriculum as a field of study has underlying ideas, beliefs, theories and assumptions which affects its process. Curriculum development is a vital component in the educational process and its main objective is to fashion out a programme of education that will foster worthwhile ideas and values of the society. This paper therefore looks at the philosophical theories and their implications for curriculum development. Key concepts such as philosophy, theory, curriculum, curriculum development are clarified. Philosophical theories of perennialism, idealism, pragmatism, existentialism and essentialism with their implications for curriculum development are also discussed.

Keywords: philosophy, curriculum, curriculum development, theory

Introduction

The curriculum field has an array of full-blown theories an abundance of theorising activity that explores different aspects of the field. Several approaches for classifying theory orientation have been proposed. One of the senses in which theory has been used in education is in the realm of philosophy of education which includes statements concerning knowledge about human nature, society, proper aims and goals of school and so on. Such philosophies represent value position that influence curriculum development. Thus, there can be no rational curriculum development without a good grounding in philosophy of education. In general, those who focus on curriculum development base their views on an underlying belief in human rationality. This is because man is seen as fundamentally a thinking-acting being, it therefore follows that human affairs should be conducted in a logical manner where consistency is a major criterion of effectiveness

Etymologically, the word Philosophy comes from the Greek words "philos" and "sophia" which means love and wisdom respectively. Putting the two together, philosophy means love of wisdom. Philosophy is seen generally as man's attempt to understand the world and all that happen in it. This incessant desire to understand phenomena gave rise to the cultivation of the mind which can be described as philosophising.

Philosophy involves three forms of activities: speculation, prescription and analyses. With the speculative function, it tries to clarify all natural events by trying to produce a general survey or an outline of various aspects of life by putting the various aspects into some patterns. The prescriptive function deals with the provision of standards for assessing values, judging conduct and approaching works of art. That is to say that philosophy teaches man how to assess or evaluate goals or actions. The analytic function deals with words and meanings. It is concerned with appropriate statements or the presentation of suitable terms and proposition or facts. From the foregoing, we can deduce that philosophy is a means of self-realization or self-knowledge. It involves insight into the worth of human life. Different branches of Philosophy include metaphysics, epistemology, axiology, aesthetics, logic and so on. Education derives knowledge from philosophy and puts that knowledge into practice. On this note, philosophy is the theory about knowledge while education is the practice of that knowledge (Olorundare, 2018). Thus, philosophy does not end with the theoretical and mental effort to look for meaning and understanding. This effort must be complemented by the dynamic effort of man to understand the world. This dynamic effort is education. Olorundare (2011) posits that philosophy describes the beliefs that make up the society and which also constitutes the meaning of education. Dewey (1916) sees education as a laboratory in which philosophical distinctions become concrete and are tested. Education depends on philosophy and vice versa. In the education sector, particularly in curriculum development, philosophy deals with the problems of what kinds of knowledge people need as tools for navigating through life

Theory

Theory is simply defined as a set of principles on which the practice of an activity is based. It is a set of interrelated constructed concepts, definitions and proposition that proceed for systematic view of phenomena. It does this by specifying relations among variables with the purpose of explaining and predicting phenomena. Tanner and Tanner (2008) see theory as a set of original principles, rules of inference that can be deductively arrived at, to describe the interaction of social affairs. In this sense, it may be regarded as a set of beliefs that forms the basis for people's actions.

Theory has been identified as springboard for prescribing and guiding practical activity in relation to education. In relation to curriculum, a theory gives meaning to a school curriculum by pointing out the relationship among its elements and directing its development, its use and evaluation. Thus theory is a source for generating knowledge about: how students will learn better, curriculum materials and how such materials will be effectively taught in the classroom leading to possible change in the learners' behaviours.

According to Olorundare (2011, 2014), the Nigerian educational system is formulated based on some forms of theories that reflect our collective culture, tradition and needs of the society. The knowledge of these theories is critical for both curriculum development and implementation. Classroom teachers must have thorough understanding of these theories not only to understand the basis of their work but also to assist them in carrying out their duties appropriately and effectively.

Curriculum

The word “curriculum “ is derived from Latin word “curere” which means to run or race course. This connotes something continuously happening. It is described as a mirror which reflects the needs and aspirations of the society in which it is being used. There are divergent opinions regarding the definition of curriculum with each one positing what school should be and the content of the curriculum. Thus, many experts have defined the concept from the prescriptive, descriptive or both angles.

Kerry (1968) as cited in Yusuf (2012) sees curriculum as all the learning, planned and guided by the school, whether it is carried on in school or outside the school. Curriculum refers to the total learning experiences intended and designed for a child in school and in society (Bilbao, Lucido, Iringan & Javier, 2008). According to Olorundare (2018), curriculum describes the learning that is expected to take place during a course or programme of study in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Alvior (2015) says it specifies the main teaching, learning and assessment methods, learning resources to support effective delivery of the course. Lee, Steketee, Roger & Moran (2013) posit that it is overall process through which the content and assessment practices of education are structured and implemented. Thus, curriculum is the heart of all learning institutions and schools can’t exist without it.

Curriculum is an inevitable aspect of education, for there can be no talks about curriculum except in relation to education, which is, indeed a supreme human activity. Primarily concerned with change in behaviour, education is a means by which individuals or members of a society acquire the knowledge, skills, habits, sentiments, and values which will enable them solve their day-to-day problems. Five basic elements constitute the features of any rational curriculum. These are situational analysis, objectives, content, method of instruction and evaluation. Situation analysis refers to determination of the needs of the society, groups and individuals in order to formulate the goals and objectives of the curriculum. Determination of the goals and objectives of the curriculum is very critical as there can be no curriculum without intended educational outcomes.

Curriculum Development

Curriculum development is the planning of learning opportunities intended to bring about certain changes in pupils and the assessment of the extent to which these changes have taken place (Nicholls and Nicholls, 1978). In the view of Abdullahi, Sani & Munhaye (2024), it refers to the principle driven actions and processes that guide and foster significant learning experiences. Obefuna (2009) posits that curriculum development is the continuous identification, selection and arrangement of learning opportunities and the criterion of curriculum materials with the appropriate teaching strategy which fits the challenging condition of a specific environment and ensures the achievement of a stated goal.

According to Sorghees and Kosapsum (2018), curriculum development is a planned, thoughtful and deliberate course of action that ultimately enhance the quality and impact of the learning experiences for students. Furthermore, it is described as a written statement of objectives, content, and activities to be used with a particular subject at specified grade levels, usually

produced by state departments, or local education authorities. Alviore (2015) and Kimanchi (2017) posit that curriculum development involves planned, purposeful, progressive and systematic process used to create positive improvements in the educational system. It is broad and an elaborate task as it is not only limited to the school, the learners and the teachers but also about the development of the society in general. It involves designing, development, implementing, monitoring, evaluating and review of curriculum materials.

Curriculum development is a dynamic process which addresses the prevalent issues in the society thus revealing the values, beliefs and principles in relation to learning, understanding, knowledge and disciplines, and the cultural and political purposes of education (Makinen and Linen, 2014).

The general purpose of curriculum development is to have an instrument of education for a society with which to foster her ideals and values and which will subsequently lead to the maximum attainment of its goal and satisfy her needs and aspirations. According to Odunusi in Ukwungwu (2018), curriculum development has four major interrelated steps which are: identification of objectives; determination of strategies; implementation or trial-testing, acceptance and modification. In developing and designing a curriculum, Abdullahi, et al (2024) posited that curriculum developers need to consider the following:

1. Outcomes- what should the learners know and be able to do at the end of an educational programme?
2. Assessment- how will learners and teachers know if the learning outcomes have been accomplished?
3. Activities- what needs to be done to achieve the learning outcomes?

Components of an effective curriculum development process according to Chauhan (2018) are: goals and objectives; content/subject matter; teaching methods; and evaluation. Participants in curriculum development include curriculum experts, teachers, learners, psychologists, subject specialists, and so on. Curriculum development is prompted by evolving societal needs, cultural shifts and responses to economic, social and political dynamics.

Philosophical Theories and Implications for Curriculum Development

This section examines the major philosophical theories that have influenced curriculum development over time. These are perennialism, pragmatism, Existentialism, Essentialism, realism and idealism.

Perennialism

Perennialists maintain that education, like human nature, is a constant and the purpose of education is to develop in a learner, ability to reason. Since man is a rational being, his education should endeavour to cultivate his reasoning power. To them, education is preparation for life, performance is more real in nature and it is more desirable as an ideal. In a world of precariousness and uncertainty, nothing is more beneficial than steadfastness of educational purpose as well as stability in educational practice.

Also, human nature is same everywhere and as such, education should be the same everywhere. Perennialists believe that educational values are universal truths and as such, it is not necessary to change a curriculum with such values. Universal truths are place and time dependent and consequently they emphasize same curriculum to all students in the same grade level. Curriculum should be based on fundamental social values, norms and practices. Perennialists advocate allegiance to absolute principles; education should seek to adjust the individual to the truth another to the physical world. Onwuka (1996) posits that perennialists maintain that:

1. Human nature is the same everywhere and so education should be the same.
2. Education should enable individuals to use their reasoning power to choose their purposes in real life and also to control their behaviour.
3. Education should propagate knowledge of eternal truth,; and
4. Education is a preparation for life, not an initiation of it.

Implication for Curriculum Development

- Learners should be taught permanence of life through structured studies.
- Subjects taught should include languages, History, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Philosophy and Fine Arts and so on.
- Methodology should include include disciplined drill and control of behaviour.

Pragmatism

This is also known as experimentalism or functionalism. This theory recognizes perpetual change in life I.e it changes its views according to trends and events. Pragmatists posit that reality is always changing and this is dependent on what we observe and experience. Humans beings can know only what they experience through their senses. The world is neither dependent nor independent of man's idea of it.

According to this theory, reality is man's interaction with his environment and this is called experience. Man and his environment constitute change and the meaning of the world depends upon the meaning man reads into it. To the pragmatists, the essence of reality is change and man should be ready to alter his way of doing things.

The pragmatists believe that the aim of education should be geared towards solving practical problems. Education should be relevant to the needs of the society. The school should help students to grow through activities, problems solving and network of social relationships. Teachers should construct learning experiences around particular problems and the solutions will lead pupils to a better understanding of their social and physical environment. All subjects become meaningful when students can use them as a means for satisfying their needs and interests.

Implication for Curriculum Development

- Educational goals and methods must be subjected to continual revision
- Growth of learners is predicated on building a network of social relationships.
- Teachers are to adopt teaching methods and techniques which will engage the learners in active learning.

- Methods of teaching advocated are problem solving, inquiry, discovery and so on. This will empower students to make intelligent decisions in life.

The functionalists believe that reality is what is actually experienced. Based on this, the experience of learners is vital in the teaching and learning process.

Existentialism

Existentialists see the world as one of personal subjectivity i.e man must assign to himself the meaning of his own existence. . To them, reality is what is lived and it is within human conditions including his feelings; it is constructed by individuals . Man is free to choose what he is and what he becomes. Discipline should not be imposed on students but they should be allowed to choose any discipline that would be worthwhile for the attainment of their educational ends.

Aboho (2018) posits that under Existentialism, every student is a free, unique and sentient being with personal fears. The teacher encourages students to think for themselves; it is presumed that knowledge is not transmitted to students but offered to him. He is more of a facilitator than a dispenser of knowledge. The school assists students to know themselves and to understand their place in society.

Implications for Curriculum Development

- There is no fixed curriculum for the Existentialism.
- Learning experiences must be geared towards solving personal problems.
- The teacher should act as a facilitator in the teaching and learning process.
- Curriculum content and pedagogy are determined by the needs and preferences of students.
- Standardised test is downplayed.

Essentialism

Essentialism is an amalgam of a number of philosophical principles. It accommodates the contributions of a number of other schools of philosophy. Essentialism according to Martin and Looms (2007) focuses on the teaching of essential components of academic, be it skill, attitude or moral knowledge. To the essentialists, all who go to school must study certain aspects of education. These essentials must be taught even if they are not of immediate use. Essentialists view curriculum as a list of planned activities which are determined by the society and learners.

Olorundare (2017) said the emphasis of Essentialism is on mastering the basis skills of reading, writing and computing together with essential subjects such as English, Science, History, Mathematics and foreign languages. These subjects are would afford learners the wherewithal to function effectively in the society. All educational efforts must be aimed at intellectual development of learners. Essentialists hold that the curriculum is centred on the training of the intellect and these beliefs are hinged on four fundamentals which are:

1. Learning involves hard work which presupposes discipline and dedication.
2. Initiation in education lies with the teacher.
3. The heart of the educational process is the assimilation of prescribed subject matter. Learners realize their potentials through their education.

4. The school should retain traditional methods of mental discipline.

The tasks of essentialists include among other things: the continued re-examination of curricular matters; distinguishing the essentials from non-essentials in school programmes; and re-establishing the authority of the teacher in the classroom.

Conclusion

Curriculum is an inevitable aspect of education while philosophy on the other hand is a prerequisite to a serious and meaningful curriculum development. Curriculum developers make use of philosophical values, positions among other findings to predict and validate the goals, objectives and content of the curriculum. Educational philosophy is considered imperative to curriculum development.

Curriculum development is a two-dimensional scheme. It progresses from a theorising stage through what may be outlined as curriculum construction and then curriculum practice and implementation. The result is to make recommendations on what is to be taught, which design the curriculum should take, the dissemination strategies to be adopted, how learning experiences should be outlined and how the curriculum should be evaluated. These facts and principles have been captured in this paper via the various philosophical theories discussed. The national policy on education while not leaning heavily on one single philosophical school of thought, consistently borrows from all available theories thus enriching it with the best the various schools of thought can offer.

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