

Perspectives and Imperatives ON DEFINING CURRICULUM

JOHN P. PORTELLI, *Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax*

Curriculum theorists and philosophers of education have traditionally tried to clarify the concept Curriculum by proceeding from a review of extant definitions of *curriculum* to definitions of their own.¹ This method has not proven very successful. Some curriculum theorists have begun to criticize this paradigm of offering definitions. Philosophers of education such as Jane R. Martin and curriculum theorists such as Herbert M. Kliebard have suggested that the analytic approach used by analytic philosophers of education to clarify other educational concepts seems more promising.² This paper provides a brief discussion of the issue of defining *curriculum* and considers four main questions: Why have theorists attempted to define *curriculum*? What definitions have they offered? Have these definitions proven useful? Do we really need to define *curriculum*?

PRELIMINARY DISTINCTIONS

Before tackling major issues involved in defining the term *curriculum*, some distinctions should be noted. In *Curriculum Theory*, George A. Beauchamp distinguishes three different uses of the term: (1) as a referent to a substantive phenomenon, curriculum, (2) as the name of a system of schooling, and (3) as a title of a field of study.³ Harry Schofield has observed that just as the concept Culture is distinguished from *culture*, that is, *culture* as a

¹The word *curriculum* in this paper is used in three ways. (a) As a term, when the intent is to describe a linguistic characteristic—*curriculum*: "This paper provides a brief discussion of the issue of defining *curriculum*." (b) As a concept—Curriculum. "Curriculum theorists are aware of the importance of getting clear about the concept Curriculum before attempting to solve questions encountered in their field." (c) To refer to a specific instance(s)—curriculum(s) "What justification is needed to make different curriculums acceptable?"

²Jane R. Martin, ed., *Readings in the Philosophy of Education. A Study of Curriculum* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1970), pp. 1-7, Herbert M. Kliebard, "Persistent Curriculum Issues in Historical Perspective," in *Curriculum Theorizing. The Reconceptualists*, ed. William Pinar (Berkeley, Calif: McCutchan, 1975), pp. 39-50.

³George A. Beauchamp, *Curriculum Theory*, 4th ed. (Itasca, Ill.: F. E. Peacock, 1981), pp. 59-62

particular aspect or manifestation of the larger concept Culture, so Curriculum must be distinguished from *curriculum*.⁴ Schofield's *curriculum* seems identifiable with Beauchamp's use of the term *curriculum* as the curriculum of a particular school, distinct from that of Curriculum in general. Curriculum in the wider sense is not an ideal or universal curriculum but a conceptual boundary of particular curriculums. When philosophers of education and curriculum theorists try to define *curriculum*, what they have in mind is Curriculum in the wider sense.

Another distinction is that between scientific and non-scientific or general definitions. What distinguishes scientific from non-scientific definitions, according to Israel Scheffler, is that the former are "technical in purport and call for special knowledge and the use of special criteria in their evaluation."⁵ I am concerned here with general definitions of which there are three types: descriptive, stipulative, and programmatic.⁶

WHY DEFINE CURRICULUM?

Books on Curriculum invariably start with a definition of the term. To determine whether the definitions offered are helpful, we must understand why the definitions are offered. What has been the purpose of defining the term *curriculum*?

When we attempt to define something, we generally try to state the meaning or nature of the thing being defined so that we can delimit the concept in question and become clearer about the use of the *definiendum*. H. L. A. Hart describes the process: "Definition, as the word suggests, is primarily a matter of drawing lines or distinguishing between one kind of thing and another, which language marks off by a separate word."⁷

What curriculum-theorists and philosophers of education have in mind when they attempt to define *curriculum* is clarifying the nature of the concept. This endeavor is considered necessary because various meanings (at times opposing ones) have been ascribed to the term. At the beginning of a book

⁴Harry Schofield, *The Philosophy of Education: An Introduction* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1972), p. 123

⁵Israel Scheffler, *The Language of Education* (Springfield, Ill. Charles C Thomas, 1960), pp. 12-13.

⁶The distinction among descriptive, stipulative, and programmatic definitions is also made by Israel Scheffler. See *ibid.*, pp 11-35 A stipulative definition merely stipulates "that a given term is to be understood in a special way for the space of some discourse or throughout several discourses of a certain type" (p. 13) Descriptive definitions may serve the same purpose as that of stipulative definitions, although their main characteristic is "to explain the defined terms by giving an account of their prior usage" (p. 15). A programmatic definition states, implicitly or explicitly, the way something should be defined. On the notion of definition, one could make other distinctions; see Richard Robinson, *Definition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954).

⁷H. L. A. Hart, *The Concept of Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 13.

on Curriculum, theorists generally offer a stipulative definition.⁸ The second reason that clarifying the term *curriculum* is considered crucial is that the design, justification, application, and evaluation of a particular curriculum depend on the understanding of Curriculum that is brought to the task. James R. Gress and David E. Purpel have said, "An attempt at definition is particularly appropriate and useful because much of one's understanding of the problems and issues treated in subsequent sections will be colored by one's way of defining curriculum."⁹

Some major issues arise:

1. Is Curriculum distinct from instruction?
2. What is the relation between Curriculum and the plan, objectives, content, method, and evaluation? (The answer to this question will affect the answers to such questions as "What type of program should be developed?" "What type of content should be included in a particular program?")
3. Is the notion Curriculum essential to schooling? Does teaching make sense without the notion Curriculum? (Answers to these questions affect answers to such questions as "Is there a difference between schooling and teaching? If so, what is the nature of this difference?")
4. Whom should curriculums be directed toward? Who should decide curriculum matters? What justification is needed to make different curriculums acceptable?

Curriculum theorists understand the importance of clarifying the concept Curriculum before trying to solve questions encountered in their field. Some theorists have argued that a universally acceptable definition is essential. The implication, according to these theorists, seems to be that without such a definition communication and conceptual progress will be hampered. Other theorists attempt to evaluate current definitions and state why one is more plausible than another.¹⁰ Some offer a definition of their own.¹¹ Most have offered not a conclusive definition but a stipulative or a working definition. Have these definitions been helpful? Have they succeeded in clarifying Cur-

⁸See Ronald C. Doll, *Curriculum Improvement. Decision Making and Process*, 6th ed (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1986), pp. 6-8; James R. Gress and David E. Purpel, eds., *Curriculum An Introduction to the Field* (Berkeley, Calif.: McCutchan, 1978), pp. 1-5; Daniel Tanner and Laurel N. Tanner, *Curriculum Development. Theory into Practice* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), pp. 3-43.

⁹James R. Gress and David E. Purpel, eds., *Curriculum: An Introduction to the Field* (Berkeley, Calif.: McCutchan, 1978), p. 1.

¹⁰See Daniel Tanner and Laurel N. Tanner, *Curriculum Development*, 2nd ed (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 43; Richard L. Derr, "Curriculum A Concept Elucidation," *Curriculum Inquiry* 7 (Summer 1977): 145.

¹¹James R. Gress and David E. Purpel state, for example, "It is a truism, perhaps, to say that one can find at least as many definitions of curriculum as one can find curriculum textbooks" James R. Gress and David E. Purpel, eds., *Curriculum. An Introduction to the Field* (Berkeley, Calif.: McCutchan, 1978), p. 1

riculum? The answers to these questions hinge on an examination of the various definitions offered.

CURRICULUM: CONTENT, EXPERIENCES, OR PLAN?

Discussing attempts to define the term *education*, Jonas F. Soltis writes: Part of the problem involved in talking and thinking about education is the variety of definitions and views of education offered to us on all sides. We are literally bombarded with a multitude of competing definitions which tempt us to choose among them, to mix an eclectic set of fragments from them, or even to reject them all and find the "real" definition of education for ourselves.¹²

The situation is at least as bad for the term *curriculum*. Daniel Tanner and Laurel N. Tanner believe that "contemporary curricularists regard the matter of definition as highly significant, even crucial, for conceptual and operational progress."¹³ In 1973, Ian A. C. Rule identified 119 different definitions of the term *curriculum*.¹⁴ Today, he could add a score of new definitions to the list.¹⁵ But, according to Richard L. Derr, "No one of these definitions has been able to command the support of the bulk of theoreticians and practitioners in the field of curriculum."¹⁶ Thus, the problem of defining *curriculum* is complex. My aim is not to analyze and evaluate every identifiable definition offered. I will comment on some of the major definitions that can be classified under these categories: (1) *curriculum* defined in terms of content, (2) *curriculum* defined in terms of experiences (activities), (3) *curriculum* defined in terms of a plan.

Curriculum as Content

The traditional vision of Curriculum is defined in terms of content. Although not common today, the conception is still used by some theorists. It identifies Curriculum with a course of studies (which lists content, subjects, or subject matter). Curriculum is what students should be taught. The content is generally identified with certain subject matters—the "cumulative tradition of organized knowledge." This view is propounded in the work of theorists known as *perennialists* and *essentialists*.¹⁷ Not all proponents of this conception

¹²Jonas F. Soltis, *An Introduction to the Analysis of Educational Concepts*, 2nd ed. (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1978), p. 7.

¹³Daniel Tanner and Laurel N. Tanner, *Curriculum Development*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 4.

¹⁴Ian A. C. Rule, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Meaning(s) of "Curriculum"* (doctoral diss., New York University, 1973).

¹⁵James A. Beane, Conrad F. Toepfer, Jr., and Samuel J. Alessi, Jr., *Curriculum Planning and Development* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1986), pp. 28–35.

¹⁶Richard L. Derr, "Curriculum: A Concept Elucidation," *Curriculum Inquiry* 7 (Summer 1977): 145.

¹⁷*Perennialism* is the name of a movement in the philosophy of education that objects to some of the main tenets of progressivism. The main exponents of this movement include educationists such as R. M. Hutchins and M. J. Adler. *Essentialism* is the name of another educational-philosophical perspective put forth by some educationists such as W. C. Bagley, T. Briggs, and H. H. Horne. The basic tenet of this position is that there are certain essential subject matters that one should know to be educated.

of Curriculum are in accord with the essentialist or perennialist stance on the selection of subject matter. The common thread is the identification of Curriculum with content. G. T. Buswell, for example, defines *curriculum* as "whatever content is used"; Morton Alpren defines it as the "content, subject matter, or what is to be taught and learned"; William B Ragan states that "traditionally, curriculum has meant the subjects taught in school, or the course of study."¹⁸ Others who have proposed similar definitions have described Curriculum as "a written document" and as "the ground which pupil and teacher cover to reach the goal or objective of education."¹⁹

While the definition of *curriculum* as content is clear and precise, it is also too narrow. It does not admit (or does not capture) the complexity of the concept. Tim Devlin and Mary Warnock, who use a definition of *curriculum* that falls under this category, admit that, although this kind of definition of *curriculum* is "intelligible," it is quite "narrow." They agree that issues about teaching methods and the hidden curriculum are relevant to what children learn but believe that these issues are "not questions about the curriculum."²⁰ The vision of Curriculum as a content has made Herbert Spencer's question, "What knowledge is of most worth?"²¹ the central curriculum question in the eyes of many theorists. Martin expresses the narrowness of the approach:

What is important is that we recognize that Spencer's question is just one of many, many philosophical questions which arise in connection with curriculum, that these questions range over a wide array of topics, and that some demand one kind of answer and some another.²²

Identifying Curriculum with content assumes (1) that there is no distinction between a subject and Curriculum and (2) that there is a clear distinction

¹⁸Quoted by Ian A. C. Rule, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Meaning(s) of "Curriculum"* (doctoral diss., New York University, 1973), p. 157.

¹⁹George A. Beauchamp and Kathryn E. Beauchamp, *Comparative Analysis of Educational Systems* (Wilmette, Ill. Kagg Press, 1973), p. 3; John S. Brubacher, *Modern Philosophies of Education*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), p. 155

²⁰Tim Devlin and Mary Warnock, *What Must We Teach?* (London: Billing and Sons Ltd., 1977), p. 59. One might argue that some of the definitions that fall under this category include vague phrases. According to these definitions, however, *curriculum* refers to content, and as such no vagueness is possible. In other words, the authors of such definitions, when confronted with the question "What is the Curriculum?" reply "The content"; and this is a precise answer

²¹Herbert Spencer, "What Knowledge Is of Most Worth?" *Westminster Review* XVI (July and October 1859).

²²Jane R. Martin, *Readings in the Philosophy of Education: A Study of Curriculum* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1970), p. 6. This point is also well made by Ian A. C. Rule "It is apparent that the definers whose work falls in the content class are assuming that the content or the 'what' of education is the most important aspect of the curriculum. They are therefore assuming that the aspects which are emphasized by our definition—classes (plans, goals, the cultural heritage, behavior change, the process/product, the program, learning, experiences, and the child-life) are of less importance." *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Meaning(s) of "Curriculum"* (doctoral diss., New York University, 1973), p. 112.

between instruction and Curriculum.²³ Curriculum is the content (the what), and instruction is the process (the how). Traditionally, educators have maintained that, if one knows a subject, one can teach it.

Both of these assumptions are problematic. Tanner and Tanner have succinctly expressed the problem with the latter: "This dualistic conception of curriculum and instruction regards knowledge as though it were independent of the processes whereby the learner becomes knowledgeable."²⁴

The problem with the former is that *content* and *subject matter* are synonymous with *curriculum*. If these terms are used interchangeably, what special meaning is the definition offered supposed to indicate? Can we always regard knowledge as having an existence independent of the process through which it is communicated?²⁵

Curriculum as Experiences

The definition of *curriculum* in terms of experiences (ranging from student to school to life experiences) arose as a reaction to the traditional approach to the definition of *curriculum* as content. Curriculum as experiences is the conception of Curriculum usually found in progressivist work. According to Rule, it is still the most popular one.²⁶

The traditional conception of Curriculum was criticized on the grounds that it fostered an undesirable dualism. The emphasis on subject matter tended to neglect the learner and to divorce the school from the rest of life. Since the late 1930s, *curriculum* has often been defined in terms of experiences. *Curriculum* as "all the experiences a learner has under the guidance of the school" became the catch phrase of those who favored the new approach to

²³The first assumption is easily detected in most of the definitions that fall under this category. The second assumption is, for example, made by Gail M. Inlow and by Harry S. Broudy et al. Inlow criticizes his own earlier definition of Curriculum on the grounds that "it fails to distinguish between *curriculum* as a body of learning content" and "*instruction* as a methods avenue to learning." See Gail M. Inlow, *The Emergent in Curriculum* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1973), p. 41. Broudy et al. state that "the curriculum consists primarily of certain content," and "modes of teaching are not a part of the curriculum." See Harry S. Broudy, B. O. Smith, and Joe R. Burnett, *Democracy and Excellence in American Secondary Education* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), p. 79.

²⁴Daniel Tanner and Laurel N. Tanner, *Curriculum Development*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 33.

²⁵Robin Barrow in his recent book, *Giving Teaching Back to Teachers: A Critical Introduction to Curriculum Theory* (London, Ontario: Althouse Press, 1984), has dealt with the problem of "the definition of curriculum" (p. 8). He concludes that what we need is "a conception of curriculum that is clear, coherent, consistent, and relatively specific" (p. 10). He adopts Hirst's definition as "a programme of activities." But he also writes, "I shall use the word curriculum to refer only to prescribed content" (p. 11). However, surprisingly enough, chapter 4 is entitled "Curriculum Content." Defending his call for clarity, one might ask what the phrase "curriculum content" means. If, as Barrow stipulates, the word *curriculum* is to refer only to content, then the phrase "curriculum content" translates "content content." The expression seems redundant.

²⁶Ian A. C. Rule, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Meaning(s) of 'Curriculum'* (doctoral diss., New York University, 1973), p. 31.

defining *curriculum*.²⁷ The approach was dominant from the 1930s through the 1970s, as evidenced by the number of definitions of this kind and the influence of the approach in the running of schools.²⁸

Some of these definitions looked at school experiences as a general phenomenon across students; others looked at school experiences for individual students. According to the latter, every student has his own unique curriculum. Both perspectives define *curriculum* in terms of experiences or activities, and the definitions offered are all-embracing.

The criticism most commonly raised with the experiences approach is that by embracing all school experiences these definitions are too broad. This breadth of scope can run counter to the aim of a definition. Hilda Taba writes, "The very breadth [of such definitions] may make the definition non-functional."²⁹ Moreover, if Curriculum were to include all the experiences that learners have, then nothing could count as an extracurricular activity.

In line with this first criticism is the issue of what should count as "experiences." Are all the experiences, desirable or not, relevant to learning or not, included? Is the school really responsible for each experience of every student? While an unqualified affirmative is out of the question, a negative response requires criteria for distinguishing the relevant from the non-relevant. The criteria are not included in the experiences definitions.

Some theorists define *curriculum* by the experiences of each individual. These theorists argue that the experiences of students vary from one individual to the next, just as students' interests, upbringing, and the capabilities they bring to school vary. The conception implies as many curriculums in a school as there are students. Can such a conception allow for the identification of a curriculum? Even if a useful identification of a curriculum can be made on this basis, the issue of establishing a criterion for including experiences still remains.

Curriculum as a Plan

The attempt to define *curriculum* in terms of a plan first appeared in the early 1960s. Taba, an early exponent of this position, described *curriculum* as "a plan for learning."³⁰ James B. Macdonald proposed a similar definition

²⁷Daniel Tanner and Laurel N. Tanner, *Curriculum Development*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 15.

²⁸Ibid., pp. 15–19. In addition to definitions of this type quoted here from Caswell and Campbell (1935), Giles et al. (1942), Rugg (1947), Alberty and Alberty (1962), and others, similar definitions appeared in *Education* 78 (February 1958): 328 by Wagner; in John Wilson, *Philosophy and Practical Education* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 62 by H. T. Johnson; and in *Curriculum Development*, 6th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1986), p. 6 by Ronald C. Doll.

²⁹Hilda Taba, *Curriculum Development: Theory and Practice* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1962), p. 9.

³⁰Ibid., p. 11.

in 1965: "those planning endeavors which take place prior to instruction."³¹ This approach is gaining popularity. According to those who favor it, the definition of *curriculum* as a plan avoids problems posed by the other two major approaches. Still, the definition of Curriculum as a plan has its own problems.

If Curriculum is a plan, what kind of plan is it? A plan of teaching method? A plan of objectives? A plan of content? A plan of all three? Taba maintains that it is "a plan for learning." Are we to assume Curriculum includes all learning, even that which might not be educational? If the answer is negative, as I suppose it would be, a criterion to distinguish one type of learning from another is necessary. If Curriculum is identical to a plan, how is it different from a single lesson plan? How is a lesson plan distinguished from the "plan for learning"? "The nature of Curriculum as plan" (the phrase frequently used by curriculum theorists) translates as "the nature of plan as plan." The search for the plan of a plan becomes one of infinite regress.

Macdonald's definition is problematic on several counts. First, he fails to account for "instinctive intentions" that might arise in a classroom situation. Second, the definition fails to indicate what the "planning endeavors" he describes might be. Tanner and Tanner, commenting on the Curriculum-as-plan approach, write: "A far more serious problem is that such narrow definitions imply that the processes by which such plans are put into action are outside the Curriculum."³² This third problem occurs because the definition separates Curriculum from instruction. If the plan (Curriculum) and its implementation—as Norman Henchey puts it, "the communication between teachers and students"³³ (instruction)—are distinct, then the former logically comes before the latter.³⁴ Macdonald insists that Curriculum and instruction are "two separate action contexts."³⁵

What are the implications of this rigid distinction between Curriculum and instruction? One problem created if Curriculum is to instruction as plan is to "the process of actualizing the plan" is that the influence of the learning situation on the plan might be overlooked. Henchey strongly states a second problem. He believes in maintaining a balance between (1) "the substance

³¹James B. Macdonald, "Educational Models for Instruction-Introduction," in *Theories of Instruction*, ed. James B. Macdonald and Robert R. Leeper (Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1965), p. 6

³²Daniel Tanner and Laurel N. Tanner, *Curriculum Development*, 1st ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1975), p. 25.

³³Norman Henchey, *Curriculum Theory and Its Relevance to Teachers' Education* (doctoral diss., McGill University, Montreal, 1969), p. 39.

³⁴One might say that it is possible to maintain the *logical* distinction even while acknowledging that in fact the learning situations or processes "influence" the curriculum planning. But then what is the point of making such a rigid distinction? To me it seems like a distinction without a difference. If so, then why make the rigid distinction at all?

³⁵James B. Macdonald, "Educational Models for Instruction-Introduction," in *Theories of Instruction*, ed. James B. Macdonald and Robert R. Leeper (Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1965), p. 5.

and form of communication" (i.e., instruction) and (2) "the underlying plan of communication" (i.e., Curriculum).³⁶ For Henchey, to divorce the two is to create a position of reductionism whereby Curriculum becomes content and instruction is "an expression of artistry or style."³⁷ (In other words, this rigid distinction would lead us back to the traditional conception of Curriculum.) According to Henchey, the reduction (and the split that it implies between theory and practice) "destroys the basic integrity of the educational process which must constitute a continuum between the formulation of objectives for the system as a whole and their particular implementation in classroom instruction." He continues, "It is only through unified and developed plans or curriculum that the theory and practice of an educational system can be bridged."³⁸

Henchey's contention that a strict separation of Curriculum and instruction will have these consequences is plausible. The definition does not become workable, however, by merely saying that neither instruction nor Curriculum should dominate, or by deciding that the two should not be entirely distinct from each other. Given the way Macdonald defines *curriculum* and *instruction* (where *curriculum* is a plan and *instruction* is the plan put into effect), the divorce of the terms cannot be avoided.³⁹

DEFINITION: THE MYTH

Many definitions have been offered for the term *curriculum*. As Le Roi Daniels and Jerrold Coombs have pointed out, most of the definitions "tend to distort the concept of curriculum" partly because most of the definitions capture only one of the various characteristics of Curriculum.⁴⁰ Not all curriculum theorists see Curriculum as a single dimension, though. Several theorists make the distinction between the formal (or official or mandated) curriculum and the hidden (or implicit, unstudied, invisible, unwritten, covert, latent, or silent) curriculum.⁴¹ Elliot Eisner also introduced the paradoxical notion of

³⁶Norman Henchey, *Curriculum Theory and Its Relevance to Teachers' Education* (doctoral diss., McGill University, Montreal, 1969), p. 40.

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 41.

³⁹Macdonald later moved away from the view represented here to a more integrated view. See James B. Macdonald, Bernice J. Wolfson, and Esther Zaret, *Reschooling Society: A Conceptual Model* (Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1973), p. 22.

⁴⁰Le Roi Daniels and Jerrold Coombs, "The Concept of Curriculum" in *Philosophy of Education: Canadian Perspectives*, ed. Donald B. Cochrane and Martin Schiralli (Don Mills, Ontario: Collier Macmillan Canada, 1982), p. 251.

⁴¹See, for example, A. V. Kelly, *The Curriculum. Theory and Practice* (London: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 5; Robin Barrow, *Giving Teaching Back to Teachers: A Critical Introduction to Curriculum Theory* (London, Ontario: Althouse Press, 1984), pp. 10-11; Elliot W. Eisner, *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1985), pp. 87-97.

"the null curriculum"—"what the schools do not teach."⁴² Yet curriculum theorists still believe that our understanding of the term is less clear than it should be. (Robert Dreeben, for example, "despair[s] of trying to define curriculum."⁴³) The implication is that more work must be done to clarify the nature of Curriculum.⁴⁴ Despite the problems encountered in attempting to define *curriculum*, many theorists believe that clarifying the term, which will in turn help to delimit the field of curriculum theory, can be solved by offering an adequate definition.

Still, defining on its own may not help. Curriculum theorists cannot agree on any definition offered yet. The various types of definitions offered so far are all problematic. Perhaps this disagreement points to a problem beyond any single attempt at definition to the notion of definition in itself. Curriculum is a complex notion, one that involves elements of such a varied nature that a definition cannot capture its full meaning.

Martin and Kliebard have both suggested that the methods used by analytic philosophers of education may be more helpful.⁴⁵ Kliebard speaks of constant disagreement on what the curriculum field is and what its relationship to "cognate fields" is. He believes that "this problem involves a clarification of the chaotic state of curriculum terminology, a problem alluded to by many leaders in the curriculum field since the 1920s."⁴⁶ Kliebard insists that "the approach to the problem, however, need not take the form of simply attempting to legislate the use of certain terms in certain ways. It involves the broader and more difficult task of critically analyzing the concepts we use as a way of clarifying the nature of our enterprise."⁴⁷ He goes on to explain how an analytic approach might aid in dealing with this issue. A similar position has recently been expressed by Edward J. Power.⁴⁸ Some curriculum theorists

⁴²Elliot W. Eisner, *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), pp. 97–107.

⁴³Robert Dreeben, "The Unwritten Curriculum and Its Relation to Values," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 8 (November 1976): 115.

⁴⁴Richard L. Derr, "Curriculum: A Concept Elucidation," *Curriculum Inquiry* 7 (Summer 1977): 145–155. Some, including David L. McCrory ("A Map of the Concept of Curriculum Theory," *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1981, pp. 91–102), have referred to the issue of defining Curriculum as a "Controversy" (p. 91); others, such as David Pratt, refer to the "many competing definitions" of Curriculum and to "the failure to arrive at agreement" (*Curriculum: Design and Development*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980, p. 4). This and the fact that one can identify more than 100 definitions of Curriculum support Derr's claim.

⁴⁵Jane R. Martin, ed., *Readings in the Philosophy of Education: A Study of Curriculum* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1970), pp. 1–7. Herbert M. Kliebard, "Persistent Curriculum Issues in Historical Perspective," in *Curriculum Theorizing: The Reconceptualists*, ed. William Pinar (Berkeley, Calif.: McCutchan, 1975), pp. 43–44.

⁴⁶Herbert M. Kliebard, "Persistent Curriculum Issues in Historical Perspective," in *Curriculum Theorizing: The Reconceptualists*, ed. William Pinar (Berkeley, Calif.: McCutchan, 1975), p. 43.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Power writes "Recognizing the supreme significance of the curriculum in the educational process, exponents of analysis are dismayed to read curricular theories and plans lacking both meaning and precision. Too much of curricular theory, they aver, is filled with and dominated

have suggested a similar approach for *curriculum design*. Edmund C. Short, for example, explicitly states, "Some analytic work is needed to fully understand the problem of curriculum design and to offer compelling new designs."⁴⁹

This issue brings us to a question raised at the beginning of this paper: Do we really need to define *curriculum*? Some theorists, recognizing that the definitions offered so far have not been very successful, believe that further attempts at formally defining *curriculum* will not contribute to a clarification of the concept Curriculum. Many proceed in the traditional way (although they, too, recognize that the definitions offered so far are all problematic in one respect or another). They still believe that the problem will be solved simply by offering a definition.

Myth is a double-edged concept. In "Curriculum as Myth," when Henchey argues that not recognizing the complexity of Curriculum leads to reductionism, his point is that curriculum theorists should be more aware of the complexity of the concept.⁵⁰ Since curriculum theorists have taken a reductionist approach, they have not been able to understand the complexity of the issue. A negative myth—an illusion—has resulted.

Curriculum theorists have created another negative myth. They have not recognized that, alone, the method of defining will probably not help to clarify the nature of Curriculum.

The stronger the belief in a definition of *curriculum*, the stronger the myth. The view that a universally accepted definition of *curriculum* is needed⁵¹ seems to imply the belief that there is one definition that captures the essence of the concept Curriculum. But this view treats Curriculum as if it were a concept of the order *elephant* or *triangle*. Curriculum is not that kind of concept. To borrow a metaphor from Soltis, those who look for the definition of *curriculum* are like a "sincere but misguided centaur hunter who, even with a fully provisioned safari and a gun kept always at the ready, nonetheless will never require the services of a taxidermist."⁵²

Other theorists do not search for the definition of *curriculum* but offer a working definition instead. To use another metaphor, this one from Neil

by tired and time worn slogans whose current meaning (assuming a meaning at one time) is either obfuscated or confused. Perhaps most troubling of all is the evidence of superficiality in all curricular planning, ranging all the way from the first grade to the graduate school. The curriculum, we agree, could turn out to be a fertile field for analytic philosophy to cultivate." Edward J. Power, *Philosophy of Education* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1982), p. 151

⁴⁹Edmund C. Short, "A Historical Look at Curriculum Design," *Theory into Practice* 25 (Winter 1986): 3.

⁵⁰Norman Henchey, "Curriculum as Myth," *McGill Journal of Education* 16 (Fall 1981): 264–265.

⁵¹See Daniel Tanner and Laurel N. Tanner, *Curriculum Development*, 1st ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1975), p. 6; Daniel Tanner and Laurel N. Tanner, *Curriculum Development*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 36. In the latter reference, they explicitly ask, "Is agreement on definition so essential to conceptual progress, as many curricularists believe?" (italics added)

⁵²Jonas F. Soltis, *An Introduction to the Analysis of Educational Concepts*, 2nd ed. (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1978), p. 7.

Postman, these theorists realize that a Chevy Impala cannot travel to Mars however many options are added to it.⁵³ Still, they keep on adding things to the Chevy, hoping to find the one that will do the trick. Eisner admits that Curriculum is not a natural entity but a complex notion, and a "real" definition is impossible. Still, he attempts a definition. If this definition is not a "real" one, what is it? Unreal?⁵⁴

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Trying to clarify central concepts by proposing definitions for them has been popular in other fields—philosophy and science, for example—as well as in educational studies. Scientists and philosophers agree on the limitations of this approach. The renowned British physicist J. D. Bernal, discussing the attempt to offer an acceptable definition of science or physics, writes: "My experience and knowledge have convinced me of the futility and emptiness of such a course. . . . Indeed, science has so changed its nature over the whole range of human history that no definition could be made to fit."⁵⁵ Several philosophers, including such prominent educators as Richard S. Peters and Thomas F. Green, have made similar observations on the inappropriateness of this paradigm.⁵⁶

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein makes two important points about definition. First, for certain kinds of concepts such as *game* or *justice*, no definition that encompasses all the different uses of the concept can be formulated. Second, the meaning of words, especially of abstract words, cannot always be explicated by pointing out some common referent of these words.⁵⁷

The influence of Wittgenstein's remarks on philosophers (both within and outside educational studies) is clear. Peters's remarks here—drawn from a discussion on the concept of education—reflect this influence: "The uses of a word are not always related by falling under a definition as in geometry where definitions are provided for terms such as 'triangle.' Rather they often form a 'family.' . . . 'Education' is a concept of this sort."⁵⁸ Green has taken a similar stance:

⁵³Neil Postman, "Telling It Like It Ain't. An Examination of the Language of Education," in *Alternatives in Education*, ed. Bruce Rusk (Toronto: Toronto General Publishing, 1971), pp. 19–20.

⁵⁴Elliot W. Eisner, *The Educational Imagination. On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1985), p. 45.

⁵⁵J. D. Bernal, *Science in History, Volume I: The Emergence of Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press), pp. 3, 30.

⁵⁶Richard S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966); Thomas F. Green, *The Activities of Teaching* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971).

⁵⁷See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976), sections 29, 49, 66, and 71. Some of the issues raised by Wittgenstein were dealt with much earlier by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, although he is not as explicit as Wittgenstein. See particularly Aristotle's discussion of "the good" in Book I.

⁵⁸Richard S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966), p. 23.

It is part of the popular mythology that we cannot have fruitful philosophical discussion unless we first define our terms. This point of view is certainly false, but the fact that it is false is not nearly as important as the additional fact that it is misleading. The object of philosophical analysis is to arrive at something like a definition; therefore, in principle, it cannot start with one. It is simply not true that the quest for clarity is a fruitless venture or that it can proceed only with agreement on definitions.⁹⁹

Curriculum theorists have begun to attack the paradigm of offering definitions. Although I am also critical of this method, I do not believe it has been entirely without merit. While I concur with Green's belief that the approach can be misleading, it has made some curriculum theorists and philosophers of education aware of the complexity of the concept Curriculum and of the various meanings attached to it.

At this stage, it may seem that I have been arguing that it does not matter how we view Curriculum. This impression does not capture my position, for my major aim, following Martin's and Kliebard's suggestions, has been to indicate the problems inherent in believing that the arduous and ongoing task of clarifying Curriculum will be achieved by simply proposing new definitions. I am not, in other words, promoting the idea that we should not develop, justify, and formulate a curriculum perspective or vision (in contrast to a neat, simple, and formal definition). Having a well-thought-out and justified curriculum perspective is crucial. But this perspective cannot be captured by a straightforward definition because of the very nature of Curriculum, namely, the kind of concept it is.

It may also seem that I am simply making a theoretical or formal point that has no practical relevance. I will, therefore, conclude this paper by outlining some of the implications for policy and research.

Given that Curriculum is a complex and elusive notion, simplistic answers to the question "What is Curriculum?" will be misleading, for such answers will not capture the complexity of the notion and, therefore, will present a false or incomplete picture of Curriculum either by stressing one characteristic to the exclusion of others or by identifying Curriculum with only one aspect. Thus, policy recommendations following these answers may lead to unwarranted courses of action. For example, if Curriculum is defined simply or exclusively in terms of content or subject matter, then we might form the false impression that the question "What should be taught?" is the primary (and for some, the only) curriculum question. Once this question has been settled, some might think, the practices relating to curriculum issues have been solved.

Let me give another example. If only certain aspects of Curriculum are emphasized—for instance, that Curriculum is identical to a descriptive plan—then we might believe that Curriculum is a descriptive concept rather than a normative one. Such a perspective will, in turn, imply that normative questions relating to Curriculum—for example, the question of justifying curriculum

⁹⁹Thomas F. Green, *The Activities of Teaching* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1971), pp. 15–16

content, methods, and objectives—might be seen as falling beyond the realm of the curriculum specialist. But since a proper analysis of Curriculum indicates that it is essentially a normative concept,⁶⁰ then such justificatory issues should be considered during a primary stage of the process of constructing or developing a curriculum. We should not aim first to produce a curriculum and then to justify it, as if the justificatory issue were something extraneous or added on to the process.

This latter point relates to one Martin makes. She contends that curriculum theorists are more inclined to produce theories about Curriculum without "investigating the foundations of their own enterprise" and analyzing the concept.⁶¹ Martin is not suggesting that we should not produce curriculum theories. Her point is that the theories should be supplemented by philosophical considerations. Martin is not, however, putting the onus only on curriculum theorists. In a more recent article, she claims that "contemporary philosophers of education have not given curriculum its due. . . . Contemporary philosophical investigation of curriculum has for some time been in a rut."⁶²

More emphasis should be directed toward investigating the relationship between Curriculum and other educational concepts and issues, as well as the underlying philosophical criteria of our vision of Curriculum. This process requires the cooperation of philosophers of education and curriculum theorists in tackling the unresolved issue of clarifying Curriculum and the subsidiary questions that arise from it.⁶³

JOHN P. PORTELLI is Assistant Professor of Education, Mount Saint Vincent University, 166 Bedford Highway, Halifax, Nova Scotia B3M 2J6, Canada.

⁶⁰I have argued elsewhere for this position. See John P. Portelli, *Philosophical Approaches to the Justification of the Curriculum* (doctoral diss., McGill University, Montreal, 1984), chapter 3, pp. 57–127.

⁶¹Jane R. Martin, *Readings in the Philosophy of Education. A Study of Curriculum* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1970), pp. 1–2.

⁶²Jane R. Martin, "Needed: A Paradigm for Liberal Education," in *Philosophy and Education*, ed. Jonas F. Soltis. Eightieth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 37–38.

⁶³I would like to thank the Editors and the two anonymous referees for their helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper and Mount Saint Vincent University for a grant that enabled me to revise this paper.

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