What, if anything, can we learn from the history of curriculum?

Peter Menck, Emeritus
University of Siegen, Germany

Abstract:
In the first section I am going to introduce *(Plato's) Socrates* and I'll ask him the following questions: How do we learn? What are we to learn? Why shall we learn? The answers Socrates gives will secondly serve me as a basis for my argument: If there could be any lesson to learn from the history of education and curriculum this lesson has to be disclosed within the framework of the concepts of selection and power; acquisition and commitment; and examination and criticism. My conclusion is: history may serve as a means of pedagogical *Bildung*, that is,a means for the formation of educators as "educators."

When I studied at the University of Bonn in the late 1950s, I had to take some courses in education. Josef Derbolav introduced us to – Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, with the result that I was reminded of Georg Philpp Telemann's cantata, *The Schoolmaster*, and the nice canon the latter sang with his boys:

Ciciderunt in profundum
Summus Aristoteles,
Platon et Euripides –

... to hell with all those ancient authors we had to struggle with! So a couple of years later when I became professor of education I forgot about history. I occupied myself with curriculum development, and finally I was "looking into classrooms" (and that is what I have been doing until now). Another 15 years later I noticed a strong, though naïve, interest in history – I noticed it in my own children as well as in my students. It seemed to me as if they had transformed the fundamental question of human existence: *Who am I*? into the other one: *Where do I come from*? – the "roots" question as you may label it.

Admittedly, a basic question of our discipline, namely of curriculum theory, follows exactly the same pattern. For a long while we did not even ask this question: What is curriculum? We simply developed curricula. But as soon as we have to specify criteria, to justify selection and decisions, we are confronted with that question. Might we find an answer when transforming it into the SSCH question: *What is the history of our modern curriculum like*? I think it was this logic which led me – back to history and back to the ancient Greeks!

(1)

In 1959 Josef Dolch published a careful and scholarly book on *The Curriculum of the Old World* [Lehrplan des Abendlandes. Zweieinhalb Jahrtausend seiner Geschichte]. Though in meantime much more details have been found out, nothing comparable with that history of 2500 years of curriculum has been published since then. But that is not what I would like to point out. Studying Dolch's book might convey a strong impression: of continuity and change over the centuries. It seems as if change wasn't surprising in history. As the old hexameter says:

Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis.
[Times are changing and we are changing with them.]

It is continuity we would not have expected – after so many revolutions: political, philosophical, scientific, and even pedagogical revolutions or be it even "reforms." On closer examination, it is quite the reverse: It is *change* that *must be explained* and this is exactly the historian's job. And it is continuity we can expect. At least it is a good idea to employ the expectation of continuity as a hypothesis when exploring e.g. the nature of curriculum. I would like to express this hypothesis in the form of a syllogism:

Premises — Socrates and those who took part in his dialogues were human beings.
Socrates and his collocutors had to solve the problem of how to educate the leading cadres in their ancient society.
They seemed to agree on a few essentials concerning the education [paideia, Bildung] of the youth.
Now we are human beings and live in a (human) society [politeia].

Conclusions — Thus we have to solve the same problem.
And thus we may test – my "hypothesis" – whether or not their answers may be or partly may be our answers.

At least our old friends whom I introduced as examples in my syllogism show us the need for further investigation as the endings of some significant dialogues do:

[Soc.] ... I maintain, my friends, that every one of us should seek out the best teacher whom he can find, first for ourselves, who are greatly in need of one, and then for the youth ...

[Lys.] ... Come to my house to-morrow at dawn, and we will advise about these matters. For the present, let us make an end of the conversation. ... [from *Laches*]

> Protagoras replied: ... Let us come back to the subject at some future time; at present we had better turn to something else.
> By all means, I said, if that is your wish; for I too ought long since to have kept the engagement of which I spoke before ... and we went our way.
> [from *Protagoras*]

I would like to elucidate my argument by referring to Dolch and to the ancient Greek philosophers, whom Dolch took as the starting point for his history. Dolch wrote about the *Lehrplan* – which must not be understood as a literal equivalent to the term "curriculum" in English. Simply speaking, *Lehrplan* is the canon of school subjects or disciplines. Therefore Dolch's book is a reconstruction of what was to be taught at (elementary and) secondary schools or, more precisely speaking, at the schools for the lower and the upper classes, from the ancient Greeks up to the beginning of the 19th century. In other words, the central thread along which Dolch goes back into history is the problem: what field and what amount of knowledge makes a human being human. Briefly summing up his results, this is the history of the emergence, development, and modification of the liberal arts' canon.

(2)

In the following I would like to emphasize a special problem in this context. My interest in it was aroused by Josef Derbolav, that academic teacher of mine whom I referred to at the beginning. It was a quite simple question he asked, a question that forced us to reflect on the disciplines we studied, math and physics in my case and theology. What is embedded in the knowledge we were to study and to teach, that contributes to the students' education, *Bildung*, and that makes up the *Bildungssinn*, as we put it in German, of a given subject. And it was Socrates'-Plato's answer to this question that induced Derbolav and the contemporary educationists of that time to read Plato with us.

At the beginning of Plato's *Republic* the old Cephalus says in Pindar's words:

> Hope [...] cherishes the soul of him who lives in justice and holiness.
>
> [All quotes in the following from the *State*; my emphases.]

What is "justice," and what is a just man? this is the opening question of the sequence of dialogues of the *Republic* [politeia]:

> Well said, Cephalus, I [sc. Socrates] replied; but as concerning justice, what is it?

First they try to find out, what a just man is like, but they do not succeed. Therefore Socrates makes a new attempt:

> ... justice, which is the subject of our enquiry, is, as you know, sometimes spoken of as the virtue of an individual, and sometimes as the virtue of a State.
> True, he replied.
> And is not a State larger than an individual?
> It is.
> Then in the larger the quantity of justice is likely to be larger and more easily discernible. I propose therefore that we enquire into the nature of justice and injustice, first as they appear in the State, and secondly in the individual, proceeding from the greater to the lesser and comparing them.
> ...
> And if we imagine the State in process of creation, we shall see the justice and injustice of the State in process of creation also.

In this way they begin to construct or reconstruct "the" state. The crucial problem they finally arrive at is that of the selection and education of the statesmen:

> Then he who is to be a really good and noble guardian of the State will require to unite in himself philosophy and spirit and swiftness and strength?
> Undoubtedly.
> Then we have found the desired natures; and now that we have found them, how are they to be reared and educated?

The long-winded argument which follows leads to the famous allegory of the cave which I won't mention in detail, here. Instead I quote the interpretation Socrates gives:

> ... if I am right, certain professors of education [sic!] must be wrong when they say that they can put a knowledge into the soul which was not there before, like sight into blind eyes.

This is an allusion to the problem of the method; I shall return to that, soon.

> Whereas [Socrates continues], our argument shows that the power and capacity of learning exists in the soul already; and that just as the eye was unable to turn from darkness to light without the whole body, so too the instrument of knowledge can only by the movement of the whole soul be turned from the world of becoming into that of being, and learn by degrees to endure the sight of being, and of the brightest and best of being, or in other words, of the good.

Glaucon, Socrates' collocutor in this part of the book, agrees. Consequently – according to his line of argument – Socrates' next question is as follows:

> And must there not be some art which will effect conversion in the easiest and quickest manner; not *implanting the faculty of sight, for that exists* already, but has been turned in the wrong direction, and is looking away from the truth?
> ... should we not enquire what sort of knowledge has the power of effecting such a change?

There is "some art." I won't go into detail and explain how this has to be understood. Briefly speaking: according to Socrates we have to look for

> something which all arts and sciences and intelligences use in common, and which every one first has to learn among the elements of education.

As he (and Plato) see it, this is number. Thus, the art in question is arithmetic.

> Then this is knowledge of the kind for which we are seeking, having a double use, military and philosophical; for the man of war must learn the art of number or he will not know how to array his troops, and the philosopher also, because he has to rise out of the sea of change and lay hold of true being, and therefore he must be an arithmetician.

In the following it turns out that geometry, astronomy, and music (here: the music of the spheres) serve the same purpose.

Here I have to add that the future statesmen were approximately at the age of 15 when they were supposed to undergo this curriculum. At that age they already had the – classical – elementary or general education of a citizen which comprised two parts: *gymnastike* and *musike*. This goes beyond our sports and music. Particularly *musike* stands for a set of subjects which we nowadays would call – the "liberal arts." Thus I understand Socrates' argument as follows:

Firstly, the education of a statesman – let me say a leading cadre in a given society – is general education in the sense of: comprehensive education; the later Greek term is *enkyklopaedia*; Johann Amos Comenius called it pampaedia; in German we use the term of *Allgemeinbildung*. In *Looking into Classrooms* I speak of a "cultural minimum," which will endow the young members of a culture with the achievements of humanity, thus turning them into full members of the society they live in. ... [Thus t]he curriculum of a school which provides a general education ... outlines the contents which are part of a society's cultural minimum: from the enkyklios paideia of the Greeks to the classical three R's and some more R's, such as Religion, ARt, HistoRy of traditional European societies, and to the curriculum of a modern comprehensive school.

Secondly, the education of a statesman has to go one step further and this step is what my quotes from the Republic deal with. I must confess that I cannot follow Socrates-Plato's argument at once. As a matter of fact, math does not automatically reverse the soul by 180 degrees – from the "world of becoming" – or let me say: of temporary phenomena – "into that of being" – in my words: into that of basic insights. My reading of his argument is as follows: whatever subject we teach at school, it has to be taught in a way that releases the power which is inherent in the particular body of knowledge – the power that strives for virtue or for the good.

> Virtue – this is the topic of nearly all of Plato's dialogues. But what is virtue?

> *[Meno]* Can you tell me, Socrates, whether virtue is acquired by teaching or by practice; or if neither by teaching nor practice, then whether it comes to man by nature, or in what other way?
> *[Socrates]* ... I confess with shame that I know literally nothing about virtue ... .
>
> [The following are from *Meno*]

This is how Meno, a dialogue that is particularly popular with educationists, begins. Much to our surprise, it ends without having answered the question:

> *[Soc.]* Then, Meno, the conclusion is that virtue comes to the virtuous by the gift of God. But we shall never know the certain truth until, before asking how virtue is given, we enquire into the actual nature of virtue.

Gabriele, a student of mine in a seminar on Plato, was quite uneasy about this result. There has to be an answer, hasn't there? Let me try to give one: The "virtue" – the Greek term is *arete* – of a thing or a human action is something like the sense it makes in the context of everyday life in society which was the Greek polis – e. g. Athens – at that time. As we saw in math, sense goes beyond mere application. I understand it in a way Johann Amos Comenius put as the difference of use and abuse. That is to say: for me *arete* is something like the right use, "right" in terms of the leading convictions of a society. This is the way I, being a didactician, read Platon-Socrates.

(3)

Meno is famous because of its "inner dialogue": the dialogue between Socrates and a boy [pais]: on the length of the diagonal in a square. This dialogue serves as a proof of Socrates' hypothesis that

> all enquiry and all learning is but recollection.

How are we supposed to take that? Socrates refers to the myth of the reincarnation of the soul:

> The soul, then, as being immortal, and having been born again many times, and having seen all things that exist, whether in this world or in the world below, has knowledge of them all.

[In the dialogue *Phaedo* Socrates tries to prove this theorem:

> ... much persuasion and many arguments are required in order to prove that when the man is dead the soul yet exists, and has any force of intelligence.]

I must admit that I have some problems with Socrates' proof. Anyway, didactician that I am I have no problem in making sense of the recollection hypothesis. The boy in Meno has a concept of: "number," "twice," of "line," "square," and "angle" within himself, in his »soul«. He recollects this knowledge he has at his disposal and consequently he is able to follow Socrates' conclusive hint:

> [*Soc.*] And does not this line, reaching from corner to corner, bisect each of these spaces?

I will omit the following parts of the dialogue and jump to Socrates' conclusion:

> *[Soc.]* And that is the line which the learned call the diagonal. And if this is the proper name, then you, Meno's slave, are prepared to affirm that the double space is the square of the diagonal?
> [*Boy*] Certainly, Socrates.

What does that mean in the context of the question of virtue?

Everyday life in a given society is guided by a consensus on what is good and what is bad. This consensus is not so much like the Ten Commandments' "thou shalt" but rather a "we do things, or things are done, in this or that way." This consensus is conveyed in everyday life as well as at school. When Socrates or we ourselves are teaching, whatever subject it is, we refer implicitly and can refer explicitly to the notion of "good" and "virtue" the students have within themselves, in their "souls," and which they bring into our classrooms. Hopefully, they will follow the hints we give them in order to help them to broaden their knowledge of math, or to mature their moral convictions.

In German classrooms you can often observe a situation in which a teacher does his or her utmost to motivate the students to find out the solution of a given problem all by themselves. These teachers tell us that they have learned that from Socrates. Like a midwife [which was the profession of Socrates' mother] they have to get knowledge out of a human being, knowledge which is already inside their students. I agree in so far as they are able to recollect the knowledge which the students have within themselves. Recollection is an element of teaching: it is to link the knowledge at hand with knowledge that should be acquired. But recollection in this sense does not take the place of informing. Fundamentally new knowledge cannot emerge from existing knowledge just by recollecting. As a reminder: it was Socrates who drew the line "reaching from corner to corner."

(4)

Be it Socrates or Johann Amos Comenius or Jean-Jacques Rousseau or John Dewey, in my History of Education [*Geschichte der Erziehung* and in *Looking into Classrooms*] I argue like this. If history, in the shape of our classical figures, actually offered a lesson for us,

- it would be a lesson defined by the ruling interpretation of the world, the ruling *Weltbild*;
- its acquisition would be possible insofar as we are engaged in what history of education may teach us;
- we would need to examine the lesson critically if it is to be of use for the orientation of our professional practice.

My paper here is mainly about engagement and self-criticism. Self-criticism has many aspects, I mainly think of the following. Very often stories from the history of curriculum are told and even historical research is only done in order to legitimize one's own pedagogical aims. I won't object to progressivism nor will I plea for conservatism. My point is "legitimation." Is it just our history? Do we restrict ourselves to our view of the world, to our *Weltbild* which we establish by means of history? Or do we, being educationists and curriculum researchers, adjust or even radically criticize our images or imaginations of curriculum and of education in a democratic society.

So what can we learn from the history of education and instruction? Very little, because it doesn't offer answers to today's questions and problems. Can we learn from history? Yes, we can, insofar as we can form [bilden] ourselves as educators or teachers with the help of our ancestors' work. Let me formulate my answer once more in the way of the classical syllogism:

Premise 1: In the history of education in a society, it becomes evident what "education" in that society is.

Premise 2: Educators need to undergo a process of professionalization, that means to acquire professional knowledge, skills, and orientations.

Conclusion: Thus the study of history, the reflective study of our classics and the historical study of the practice of education and instruction can be a medium of professional identity [*pädagogische Bildung*], that is, a medium for the formation of educators as »educators«.

(5)

I have presented my reflections as a report on the learning biography of a German educationist. This biography is not representative of our discipline in Germany, let alone of educational research and curriculum theory in general. That leads me to the following question: can we consider such a way of dealing with the history of education to be a constituent of the work in our academic discipline? The conviction that the engagement with history is of great significance for education is an integral part of the way the present Society [SSCH] sees itself. But, what about our discipline in its entirety? I cannot – at least not in Germany – help feeling that it is at best natural for

Continued on page 36.

teaching in High Schools, official series, #11, July 1, 1905, 10-103.
Bulletin, Department of Education, (1916). *Texas High Schools: Classification and State Aid, #58,* September 1., 7-8.
Davidson, J.W. & Lytle, M.H. (1992) *After the fact: The Art of Historical Detection.* New York: McGraw-Hill.
Evans, C.E. (1955). *The Story of Texas Schools.* Austin, TX: Steck Co., 93.
Eby, F and Arrowood, C. (1941) *The Development of Modern Education,* New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 727-742.
Hall, R.G. (1902) *From the Standpoint of the High School Teacher.* Speech delivered before the T.S.T.A., Austin, TX. December 30. Unpublished. C.A.H., Austin, TX.
Henderson, J.L. (1940). *Educational Memoirs Joseph Lindsey Henderson.* Austin, TX:Von Boeckmann -Jones.
*The University of Texas Catalogue, 1901,*CAH., Austin, TX.
The University of Texas Catalogue, 1908, CAH., Austin, TX.
The University of Texas Catalogue, 1897, CAH., Austin, TX.
The University of Texas Catalogue, 1899, CAH., Austin, TX.
The University of Texas Catalogue, 1905, CAH., Austin, TX.
The University of Texas Catalogue, 1907, CAH., Austin, TX.
Weis, M. (1999). *Affiliation with the University of Texas: The Prize Sought by Eleven Lower Rio Grande Valley High Schools, 1901-1917.* Thesis. The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX.

Continuation of References for Kysilka and Luckett, from page 30.

Terman, L. (1919). *The Intelligence of School Children: The Use of Mental Tests in School Grading and the Proper Education of Exceptional Children.* Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
Thomas, F. W. & Lang, A. R. (1937). *Principles of Modern Education.* Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
U. S. Department of Education. (1991). *America 2000: An Education Strategy.* Washington, D.C.: U. S. Department of Education.
Williams, J. H. (1924). *Graphic Methods in Education.* Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
Williamson, O. J. (1936). *Provisions for General Theory Courses in the Professional Education of Teachers.* New York, NY: Teachers College, Columbia University.
Wilson, H. B., Kyte, G. C., Lull, H. (1924). *Modern Methods in Teaching.* New York, NY: Silver Burdett.

Continued from Menck, page 40.

educationists to occupy themselves with history. But is history really an essential part and if so, why?

Another open question remains. The degree of education of a human being is usually measured according to the amount and the nature of the knowledge, which this human being has acquired in the course of its life. For this reason for example a curriculum vitae always delineates the educational background in detail. There can be no objection to such knowledge collected in an individual biography. In Platon's dialogues its acquisition is taken for granted, as well, but he wouldn't have gone so far as to call that knowledge *paideia* [education in the full sense of the word]; and in the tradition of German pedagogy, we wouldn't go so far as to speak of *Bildung.* Platon's dialogues as well as the neo-humanistic education theory in Germany are orientated towards other aims. I have learned from Plato that we have to ask for the *spirit* of knowledge, for the sense it makes in a given society, and for the principles that guide the application of knowledge. I agree with Platon that there is no conclusive answer to be given, and that the answer can rather be found in the preoccupation – asking questions in a way, though, that is as intense and profound as Platon demonstrates it in his dialogues. Is that sufficient in our days, or is it even a luxury that, as in Socrates' society, only the upper classes can afford

Continuation of References for Pliska, Harmston, and Hackmann from page 52.

McNeil, J. D. (1996). *Curriculum: A comprehensive introduction* (5th ed.). New York: Harper Collins.
NASSP, (1996). *Breaking ranks: changing an American institution.* NASSP. Available Internet: http://www.netaxs.com/~twin/html/carnegie.html
National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1984). *A nation at risk.* Cambridge, MA: USA Research.
National Educational Commission on Time and Learning. (1994). *Prisoners of time: Report of the National Educational Commission on Time and Learning.* Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
O'Neil, J. (1995). Finding time to learn. *Educational Leadership,* 53(3), 11-15.
Ornstein, A. C., & Hunkins, F. P. (1998). *Curriculum: Foundations, principles, and issues* (3rd ed.). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
Rettig, M. D., & Canady, R. L. (1999). The effects of block scheduling. *The School Administrator,* 56(3), 14-16,18-20.
Trump, J. L., & Baynham, D. (1961). *Focus on change: Guide to better schools.* Chicago: Rand McNally.
Wilson, C. (1995). The 4:5 block system: A workable alternative. *NASSP Bulletin,* 79(571), 63-65.