

THE HISTORICAL U. S. CURRICULUM FIELD'S SENSE OF THE PAST

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Abstract

Contrary to claims by curriculum historians that the historical field of curriculum development in the US was ahistorical, this analysis of curriculum writings from the period 1918 to 1964 found that, from the beginning, the US field of curriculum development manifested a persistent historical perspective. This historiographical analysis offers a view of the historical curriculum field's perspective on the past and identifies past curriculum development initiatives that may serve as potential research topics.

When in the late 1960s the US curriculum field began to become increasingly aware of its own history, the historical field of curriculum development, spanning the second through the sixth decades of the twentieth century, was characterized as having been ahistorical. Subsequently, interest in the history of curriculum and curriculum development grew, resulting in, among other things, the founding in 1977 of the Society for the Study of Curriculum History (e.g., Kridel 1989; Burlbaw and Field 2005; Burlbaw 2011). A review of literature from the historical field of curriculum development, however, reveals a somewhat different reality. In fact, from the beginning of the US curriculum field a significant number of curriculum works devoted substantive attention to the history of curriculum and of curriculum development.

This historiographical study attempts to document and explain a persistent historical perspective manifest in the literature of the curriculum field in

the US. By doing so it corrects, or qualifies, a misrepresentation of the historical field of curriculum development, offers a view of the historical curriculum field's perspective on the past, and identifies past curriculum development initiatives that may serve as potential research topics.

In perhaps the first such characterization of the curriculum field, Kliebard proclaimed, "As a field of study, we have been a peculiarly ahistorical lot," and referred to the "ahistorical posture" of the field (Kliebard 1968, 69). Echoing Kliebard, Bellack suggested that such an "ahistorical stance seems to be characteristic not only of the current crop of curriculum reformers, most of whom are university professors of academic disciplines, but also of educationists who claim curriculum building as their field of professional specialization" (Bellack 1969, 283). Kliebard argued that during the 1920s the curriculum field was influenced not only by nationalism, immigration, "faith in the methods of science, and a concern for the uplift of the masses," but also "seems to have been shaped by . . . a reaction against what was believed to be a kind of education that was static, irrelevant to modern life, and nonfunctional" (Kliebard 1970, 31). This "tendency to denigrate the past in favor of an enlightened and inspired present" led to, among other things, "the ahistorical posture in the field of curriculum" (Kliebard 1970, 32). Hazlett later documented these and other claims about the ahistorical nature of the historical curriculum field, but he took some issue with them. Hazlett argued that rather, "the curriculum field is historically

aware” in that proposals for reform typically are responsive to current historical contexts, yet he admitted that the North American curriculum field “is ahistorical in the sense that it lacks a well-proportioned historiography” (Hazlet 1979, 130). Hazlett surmised that “the question of why there have not been more historical studies of curriculum making still remains” (Hazlet 1979, 131). Such characterizations of the field became so entrenched that as late as 1995, Pinar et al. made reference to the “ahistorical posture of the traditional field” (Pinar et al. 1995, 69).

An examination of ten significant works from the historical field suggests that although the curriculum field may not have enjoyed a formal historiography, it did have a record not only of viewing curriculum change in historical context, but also of recounting the history of curriculum and curriculum development which, in effect, was a history of the field. Granted, many classic curriculum development textbooks focused on the techniques of curriculum development at the neglect of a detailed discussion of the history of curriculum (e.g., Bobbitt 1918; Caswell and Campbell 1935; Stratemeyer, et al. 1947; Smith, Stanley, and Shores 1950; Saylor and Alexander 1954)—though they did typically couch the process of curriculum development in the social context of the contemporary historical moment. And this neglect could be explained by the fact that curriculum texts were written for curriculum courses that were component parts of professional programs of study that also included foundations courses in which a historical perspective on the curriculum would be provided. Nevertheless, a number of curriculum works expressly examined the history of curriculum and of processes of curriculum making.

In *Principles of Secondary Education*, often considered one of four founding publications of the US curriculum field (e.g., Kliebard 1968, 71), Inglis identified three phases in the history of

secondary education in the US, described continuity but especially changes in the control, support, aims, and curriculum of secondary schools in each phase, explained curriculum changes as responses to social change, and even reproduced portions of historical documents to illustrate his historical analysis. During the Latin grammar school phase of the Colonial era the secondary school “was almost exclusively classical” (Inglis 1918, 164). During the academy movement of the late 18th century and the first half of the 19th century the secondary school added courses to its curriculum beyond the college preparatory classical studies, including modern academic subjects and courses such as surveying and navigation, in response to changing social conditions. During the public high school phase beginning in the third decade of the 19th century and continuing into the early 20th century, academic courses continued to be offered alongside commercial courses. In the fashion of progressive historians (Gaither 2003, 99), Inglis used history to illuminate a current social problem as a basis for recommending reforms to a social institution.

Similarly, the first volume of the celebrated Twenty-Sixth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education (Whipple 1926) presented a history of curriculum-making in five chapters prepared by Harold Rugg in a section titled, “A Century of Curriculum-Construction in American Schools.” In his first chapter Rugg established the dynamic change in American life of the previous century and maintained that, despite this change, the school curriculum, with its emphasis on academic formalism, remained “in complacent aloofness” (Rugg 1926, 13). In his second chapter Rugg described the curriculum of the grammar schools and the academy, explained that textbooks came to dominate the curriculum, and described how the high school largely supplanted the academy by 1890. For Rugg,

although commercial courses were added to the high school, the curriculum remained a “patchwork” of subjects, still largely academically narrow and formalistic, and dominated by formal discipline. Thus, for Rugg a gap remained between the school curriculum and life.

In his third chapter, Rugg articulated examples of “curriculum-making via national committees” which he saw as characterizing the period 1890 to 1920 (Rugg 1926, 33). By focusing on prescribing subject matter, for Rugg these committees continued to maintain the gap between the school curriculum and American life. (He avoided the *Cardinal Principles* report’s efforts to relate the school to life by only discussing the CRSE’s subject-focused sub-committees.) In his fourth chapter Rugg identified 1910 as a turning point away from the previous methods—curriculum development by textbook and by committee—which he characterized as “armchair” curriculum making, and toward a period of “scientific” curriculum making which he described as a “fact-finding era” that employed the “quantitative method” in a sort of “educational laboratory” (Rugg 1926, 67, 80). He discussed studies of society and of the child as two new considerations in addition to subject matter. Rugg recognized that in its extremes the “quantitative method” applied to curriculum making could be mechanistic (Rugg 1926, 81). In his fifth chapter Rugg distinguished between the old approach to education that “concentrates the effort of the school in exclusive preparation for adult life” and the new approach that centered “on the dynamic active growth of the child” (Rugg 1926, 84). He described curriculum making in about half a dozen laboratory schools, offering in footnotes brief biographies of notable curriculum makers. Inglis’s and Rugg’s works demonstrate that the US curriculum field began with and was established upon an examination of the history of curriculum and of curriculum making. Subsequently,

curriculum scholars sustained and expanded this historical perspective.

Norton and Norton noted that between 1915 and 1935 “not less than 35,000 courses of study were issued” (Norton and Norton 1936, 3). They argued that broad historical changes, such as the rise of the experimental method, acceleration of invention, increasing diversity of cultural backgrounds, the close of the frontier, and the advance of democracy in the US, presented new conditions that the schools, as well as other institutions, must face. Moreover, they saw recent changes in American life, including industrialization, “extension of educational opportunity,” “expansion and revision of knowledge,” and “increase of human interdependence,” also placing the onus on the school curriculum to respond (Norton and Norton 1936, 9-17). Although Norton and Norton granted that responses could be varied, the fundamental point they made was that recent curriculum change was a result of both recent and historical social changes. Thus, they placed the recent curriculum development movement in a long historical view, manifesting the historical awareness that Hazlett (1979) identified.

Similarly, The Joint Committee on Curriculum opened its report with survey results that indicated, “Organized curriculum-development programs are now under way in well over seven tenths of the cities of above 25,000 population, whereas slightly less than a half and exactly a third of the school systems serving communities of 5,000 to 25,000 and below 5,000, respectively, reported such enterprises” (Joint Committee on Curriculum 1937, 1-2). The survey found that while only about ten percent of such curriculum work predated 1929, over seventy percent began after 1932 (Joint Committee on Curriculum 1937, 2). Drawing on the NSSE’s Twenty-Sixth Yearbook, the Committee recognized the growth of curriculum development

efforts during the first three decades of the twentieth century that led to the explosion in the 1930s of curriculum making initiatives.

As the US curriculum field developed over time, so did historical accounts of it. In *Curriculum Principles and Social Trends*, Gwynn provided a detailed historical overview of the curriculum of US schools, organized into four periods according to the respective prevailing “motive” of the curriculum. During the period 1635 to 1770 the “Religious Motive” guided the school curriculum, accommodating various Protestant denominations as well as Catholicism, with regional variations. During the period 1770 to 1860 the “Political Motive” guided school curriculum in which education served “the preservation of liberty and the new democratic form of government” and included the development of the common school (Gwynn 1943, 10). Gwynn summarized changes in patterns of course offerings, drawing from Inglis (1918). According to Gwynn during the period 1860 to 1920, as a response to industrialization, immigration, and enhanced transportation, the “Utilitarian Motive” was “brought rapidly to the front” (Gwynn 1943, 17), at which time the high school became gradually accepted, the federal role in education increased, the kindergarten was introduced, and normal schools were established. To illustrate curriculum changes, Gwynn reprinted courses of study from this period from high schools in Chicago and New York. Gwynn also discussed high profile committee efforts to reform the curriculum, beginning with the Committee of Ten report and concluding with the *Cardinal Principles* report. Gwynn provided a table indicating courses that had been dropped from or added to the elementary and high school curriculums during this period, but observed that as enrollments expanded rapidly, especially after the turn of the century, it was all school leaders could do to construct buildings, find well-trained teachers, and secure needed finances, and thus

attention to systematic curriculum development was delayed. In short, Gwynn presented a long history of the American curriculum organized periodically around characteristic motives, explaining historical contexts that conditioned the curriculum, and identifying changes as well as continuities in the course of study.

Gwynn identified the “Mass Education Motive” as the prevailing guide to curriculum since 1920 and devoted an entire chapter to tracing the emergence of curriculum development as a professional activity, which began in his Utilitarian Period and continued into the Mass Education period, and which he called the “Modern Curriculum Movement” (Gwynn 1943, 36, 137). Drawing from Rugg, Gwynn organized the development of the curriculum movement since 1910 into “five stages of growth.” The “aims-and objectives stage and activity analysis” (Gwynn 1943, 138) was characterized by the work of Bobbitt, Charters, Harap, and Uhl. The “survey movement in curriculum revision” (Gwynn 1943, 143) included the Classical Investigation, the Modern Foreign Language Study, the AHA Commission’s work of the 1930s, the National Survey of Secondary Education, and other projects (Gwynn 1943, 138-150). The “development of the unit technique” (Gwynn 1943, 150) Gwynn attributed to H. C. Morrison’s 1926 book and dedicated a separate chapter to it. The “system-wide curriculum revision” (Gwynn 1943, 150) stage included curriculum work on the system-level, such as in Winnetka, Denver, Detroit, and Los Angeles, and state-level curriculum work including in Virginia, Alabama, Georgia, Oregon, and California (Gwynn 1943, 151-53). The “core - curriculum movement and the large unit procedure, including the fusion movement” (Gwynn 1943, 153) stage included core curriculum development conducted in the Eight-Year Study and in California schools, large unit and fusion development in Alabama, and fused curricula in

California, Greenville, South Carolina, and Denver (Gwynn 1943, 153-162). We see again in Gwynn's work a historical perspective on both curriculum and curriculum making.

In *Curriculum Improvement in Public School Systems*, Caswell and Associates dedicated a chapter, titled, "The Changing Curriculum," to providing a broad-brush perspective on the history of curriculum change. They traced the beginnings of the American curriculum in transplanted European models, identified Franklin's proposals for the academy as the first significant departure from European forms of education, described generally the values that served as the foundation of and found expression in education developments during the first half of the nineteenth century, and considered the implications of industrialization during the second half of the nineteenth century for education development (Caswell and Associates 1950, 1-8). Caswell identified philosophical experimentalism and psychological connectionism as significant influences on curriculum thought, recognized the social role of the school that emerged during the early twentieth century, particularly the 1930s, and, finally, beginning in the 1930s, the influence of Gestalt psychology on curriculum making (Caswell and Associates 1950, 8-19).

Miller, Moyer, and Patrick opened their book on *Planning Student Activities* with a historical overview of the co-curriculum that referenced precedents in ancient Greece and Rome before examining the history of co-curricular activities in US education. Drawing from a 1935 Teachers College dissertation by Galen Jones, Miller, Moyer, and Patrick documented the expansion of co-curricular activities that occurred during the early twentieth century. They cited 1920 as a turning point in the development of co-curricular activities, the decline of such activities in schools during the Depression, and their

expansion following World War II (Miller, Moyer, and Patrick 1956, 4-11).

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's 1957 Yearbook, *Research for Curriculum Improvement*, devoted a chapter prepared by Margaret G. McKim to "Curriculum Research in Historical Perspective," in which McKim summarized "the trends in research in curriculum improvement over the past 50 years" (McKim 1957, 14) in three periods. McKim characterized curriculum work during the first quarter of the twentieth century as concerned with "objectivity" and "social utility" (McKim 1957, 16). Major developments in research related to curriculum development during this first period included the emergence of educational psychology, the measurement movement, research focused on meeting individual differences, and on teaching and learning in school subjects. McKim saw this period as characterized by the beginning of teacher participation in curriculum making and the challenge to traditional subject matter offered by progressive education. She noted that, nevertheless, the subject organization of the curriculum prevailed and that such curriculum research sought efficiency and accepted society as it was.

McKim characterized curriculum research during the Great Depression as concerned with "social analysis and values," the "dynamic aspects of learning," and expansion of the measurement movement (McKim 1957, 21). During this second period, McKim saw in the Eight-Year Study and state curriculum development programs "increased concern with the needs of the learner in his society" (McKim 1957, 25), and also saw in the Eight-Year Study an attempt to assess "experimental high school programs" (McKim 1957, 26). The third period, from World War II to the mid 1950s, McKim saw as occupied "with the dynamics of human relationships—as a fundamental aspect of democracy, as an essential

in good teaching, as a crucial element in cooperative curriculum improvement, and as a part of the research process itself” (McKim 1957, 27). This period included recognition of the importance of interpersonal and group relationships necessitated by increased participation of teachers not only in curriculum development, but also in curriculum research. McKim considered these historical developments as the basis for new research focused on areas such as classroom dynamics, curriculum designs, and increased teacher engagement in curriculum research.

In *Improving the Quality of Public School Programs*, McNally and Passow similarly prefaced their overview of selected school improvement efforts with a brief history of curriculum making in the US. They characterized curriculum change in US schools from the mid nineteenth to the early twentieth century as “piecemeal and haphazard” (McNally and Passow 1960, 29). They identified textbook writers as among the most influential curriculum developers during the nineteenth century, as textbooks served as the dominant source of curriculum content. They noted that by the late nineteenth century some cities were developing courses of study, and that teachers typically played little part in this work. They identified the 1890s and 1900s as a period of “curriculum making by national committees” (McNally and Passow 1960, 31). McNally and Passow provided the following summary or early curriculum making:

Until the close of World War I, the major influences on curriculum-making were largely outside the local school system. The national committee, the textbook writers, the college professors and university researchers, the school survey and the laboratory school personnel—all made recommendations which determined, to a greater or lesser extent,

local practice. At the local level, the courses of study were prepared by a select few central office administrators or heads of departments; they decided what subjects were to be added or modified and which textbooks would be adopted and used in the classroom. In a few exceptional systems instructional committees did include classroom teachers who were either subject specialists or persons who might facilitate the use of a committee’s finished product. In most instances, a product of some kind—syllabus, guide, book, report, test—was seen as the end goal of curriculum activity. (McNally and Passow 1960, 31-32)

McNally and Passow then identified World War I as a turning point in curriculum making.

For McNally and Passow, three forces—viewing the “school as a whole and as a social force,” realizing from research in teaching and learning “the need for relating educational ends to educational means,” and post-World War I reevaluation of educational “tools and stock” (McNally and Passow 1960, 33)—combined to propel the emergence of comprehensive, system-wide curriculum development initiatives, which they called the “curriculum movement” (McNally and Passow 1960, 34). Between the early 1920s and the mid 1930s curriculum development efforts were characterized by a comprehensive or whole school approach, expanded teacher participation, the use of committee work, a diversification of instructional materials, designated responsibility for curriculum development, and approaching curriculum improvement on a “broken front” (McNally and Passow 1960, 35-36). Despite these developments, McNally and Passow recognized that in many instances curriculum making proceeded as it had for decades, unchanged.

Finally, McNally and Passow observed that following the first two decades or so of comprehensive curriculum making “an administrative approach to curriculum building” (McNally and Passow 1960, 38) took over, comprised of an arrangement of committees emanating from the district office. Then, with the recognition that “little real curriculum improvement occurs without continuous professional and personal growth of teachers, concern shifted from administrative structure to include the complexities of educating the professional staff” (McNally and Passow 1960, 38), which they implied was the approach accepted at the time of their writing. They indicated that in this approach, “it is the teachers and students who, in the last analysis, determine what the curriculum actually is” (McNally and Passow 1960, 39)—something of a far cry from the approach dominated by textbook writers and national committees of fifty years earlier.

In his curriculum development textbook, Ronald C. Doll included a chapter titled, “Historical Foundations of Curriculum Decision-Making.” After identifying a number of enduring curriculum issues that still obtained in the early 1960s, Doll offered a brief historical overview of changes in the curriculum and in the process of curriculum change. He identified three types of education brought to North America by European colonists during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the church-state type, the parochial school type, and charity education. Despite regional variations, Doll noted that, “Education everywhere in the colonies was designed chiefly for boys, and the chief method of learning was memorization” (Doll 1964, 9). Doll discussed the subsequent replacement of the Latin grammar school with the academy, the spread of public schooling with westward expansion, the rise of the common school during the mid-nineteenth century, and the rise of the high school during the

late nineteenth century. Doll identified two dozen historical events between 1860 and 1960 that brought the public school curriculum to where it was at the time of his writing, and identified ten trends in the development of the American school curriculum.

Doll then provided a brief “history of the *process* of curriculum development,” recognizing both change and continuity in the prevalence of various approaches to curriculum making (Doll 1964, 14, emphasis in original). He identified the 1920s as the period in which in which a more systematic, system-wide approach to curriculum making began to be described in the professional literature, noting, as had McNally and Passow (1960), that at that time curriculum development was an administrative function that typically gave little truck to the teacher’s perspective. Doll identified a change in the conception of curriculum since the 1920s from the course of study to “*all the experiences which are offered to learners under the auspices or direction of the school*” (Doll 1964, 15, emphasis in original) and described nearly a dozen characteristics of contemporary curriculum making.

Based upon this examination of ten works published between 1918 and 1964 that provided historical overviews of curriculum and of curriculum making in the US, it seems reasonable to suggest that a historical perspective ran through the historic US curriculum field and that the contention that the field was ahistorical was premature—and ahistorical in itself. The following six findings emerge from the above review of this incipient curriculum history literature.

First, these early curriculum histories offered a long view of curriculum history, identifying European origins of the American curriculum and its modifications during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries (Inglis 1918; Rugg 1926; Gwynn 1943; Caswell and Associates 1950; McNally and Passow 1960;

Doll 1964). Second, in the process, early curriculum histories offered a variety of periodizations of phases of the history of curriculum (Inglis 1918; Rugg 1926; Gwynn 1943; Doll 1964) that may be worth reexamining. Third, early curriculum histories consistently contextualized both curriculum and curriculum making in broad social, economic, and professional developments, confirming Hazlet's (1979) observation. Fourth, while in some cases the proffered historical perspective served to identify past practices that should be abandoned, as Kliebard (1970) suggested, this was not always the case, particularly after the 1920s when the US curriculum field began to chronicle recent curriculum making activities, as discussed below.

Fifth, early curriculum histories attended not only to the history of the school curriculum per se, usually in terms of subjects added to and deleted from the program of studies, but also to the history of curriculum making. Indeed, these early histories manifested an awareness of the "curriculum development movement" that occurred during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s as a historical phenomenon in and of itself, and even organized twentieth century curriculum making activities into various periodization schemes (Rugg 1926; Gwynn 1943; ASCD 1957; McNally and Passow 1960). Sixth, as early curriculum histories discussed these changing emphases in curriculum making, they tended to depict the brief history of the field as one of gradual accumulation of effective curriculum development procedures, presenting previous curriculum making activities not as obsolete practices to replace, but as additions to curriculum knowledge that emerged from curriculum development practice, and as practices to build upon. Early histories recognized uneven development and dissemination of such procedures and tended to state these developments as fact without touting a progress narrative.

The historical field of curriculum development exhibited a persistent historical consciousness and perspective on curriculum and curriculum making, which may seem to go some way toward providing a "well-proportioned historiography" that Hazlet (1979) saw lacking. Or perhaps not so much. For, despite the existence of such historical accounts and perspectives, together they do not quite amount to a historiography in the formal sense of the term. These accounts were rarely, if ever, interpretive, nor did they offer a summary of previous historical accounts. When previous accounts were referenced, which in these works was rare and only of Inglis and Rugg, it was for informational, not explanatory, purposes. That is, there were no literature reviews, historiographical analyses, or debates over historical explanations, but rather just contextualization and accounts of past practice.

This is not to say that curriculum historians cannot profit from an examination of these early histories. They certainly provide past perspectives on the curriculum past that may have been lost not just to the passage of time, but also in the interpretive cacophony of more recent curriculum history work. For example, with all of the critique of activity analysis as a mechanical expression of scientism that served social efficiency and control (e.g., Franklin 1986), the consistent representation of that movement in the historical accounts of the historical curriculum field as a "scientific," quantitative, and objective approach to curriculum making can provide a clue to its significance at the time not only as a departure from curriculum making by textbook and by committee, but also as a reflection of the progressive era method of reform, which has been overshadowed by the social efficiency-control thesis. Progressive era historian Richard L. McCormick described this method as follows: Reformers "typically began by organizing a voluntary association, investigating a problem, gathering relevant facts, and analyzing

them according to the precepts of one of the newer social sciences” (McCormick 1997, 122). Thus, from the perspective of the time, the “scientific” method of curriculum development championed by the likes of Bobbitt, Charters, and others, can be understood as reflecting the progressive era faith in social science as a promising aspect of reform.

In another example, we can perhaps gain an insight into the historic field’s perspective on its past by drawing a composite periodization of curriculum making from the works consulted here. From the perspective of these works, a history of curriculum making in the US could be organized according to a chronology of: in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, curriculum making by textbook and by national committee; and subsequently in the twentieth century as curriculum making by the “quantitative” or “scientific” method (c. 1910 into the 1920s), as a comprehensive, system-wide effort (1920s), as an administrative function (1930s on), as concerned with social analysis (1930s), as concerned with dynamics of human relationships (1940s), and as curriculum development as teacher development (1940s-1950s). This periodization is similar to but also departs from and complements the chronologies of the historical field that we are accustomed to, that is, those provided by Kliebard (2004) and Tanner and Tanner (1990).

These early histories can also bring attention to past curriculum making activities that present significant topics of curriculum history research. For example, do we have good histories of the Speyer School, the unit method as originated by Morrison (1926), the National Committee on Mathematical Requirements (1920-23), The Modern Language Study (1924), The National Survey of Secondary Education, the interest in Gestalt psychology and interpersonal and group dynamics as considerations in effective curriculum development of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s? These initiatives and others identified by this early

curriculum history literature may present fruitful curriculum history research opportunities.

In conclusion, despite claims by curriculum historians that the historical field of curriculum development in the US was ahistorical, this analysis of curriculum writings from the period 1918 to 1964 found that, from the beginning, the US field of curriculum development exhibited a persistent interest in and sense of the past. Perhaps the persistent historical perspective on curriculum and on curriculum making manifest in the literature of the curriculum field in the US can offer useful insights into the curriculum past for curriculum historians today.

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