

Curriculum Definition Revisited

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Abstract- The definition of "curriculum" has been the subject of scholarly debate for decades. This commentary revisits one of the most widely accepted definitions of curriculum in health profession education and offers a revised definition. The authors aim to emphasize the importance of planned and unplanned learning experiences in the definition of curriculum. Also, the key role of students' support to help students make the most of their learning from the un-planned experiences is highlighted. In cases where the holistic learning experiences are neglected, the school is unlikely to achieve its ultimate goals.

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"Curriculum includes everything that (obviously) takes place, and everything that does not (obviously) take place, within the purview of the school."

"Quote from a teacher in the University of Delaware"
(1).

Main Document

In recent decades, with the development of new approaches in the field of education, significant inevitable changes in various fields of teaching and learning have occurred. It is obvious that these approaches should also be reflected in the definitions of the key concepts of this field. "Curriculum" is one of the concepts for which several definitions have been provided. In some of the definitions, based on a knowledge-centered approach, curriculum is defined as the outline of contents to be taught to students to help them meet the content standards (2). Another very common conceptualization of curriculum, derived from a teacher-oriented approach to education, is that of viewing it as the method of teaching and evaluating the learned content (3). Drawn from an outcome-based approach to curriculum, educational outcomes should be clearly and unambiguously specified (4). Based on the above definitions, the curriculum is considered as a planned framework set by teachers and educational designers to guide students to achieve educational goals

(3).

However, any definition of curriculum, if it is to be practically effective and productive, must offer much more than a statement about the specified learning outcomes, knowledge content, or merely the educational and assessment methods that should be delivered. Rather, a holistic definition must embrace all the learning experiences that takes place in schools, whether it is expressly planned and intended or unplanned.

In this way, UNESCO has considered a wide range of definitions for the term curriculum, ranging from a planned 'course of study' to an all-embracing view that includes all the learning experiences for which the school is responsible (5). Despite the emphasis on such a broad definition of curriculum by UNESCO, in the field of Health Profession Education, the definition of curriculum is often limited to planned educational experiences.

One of the most common definitions of the curriculum in health profession education is: "Planned Educational Experiences" (6). An analysis of this definition considering the challenges of defining a curriculum will be thought-provoking.

First, the term "educational experiences" refers to the experiences that learners gain during their learning period. However, the word "education" in this definition is ambiguous since it represents a teacher-centered

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approach based on a one-way transfer of knowledge to the learner, which neglects the learner's role in the learning process. Instead, based on a student-centered approach to curriculum, the term "Learning experiences", which highlights the totality of experiences achieved by the learners, attempts to point to the main goal of what curriculum is meant to achieve, which is to facilitate learning. The term "learning experiences" in the definition of curriculum has been emphasized by prominent experts in the field of education, including Tyler (1949), Taba (1962), Pinar (1974), and Tanner (1985) (3).

Secondly, the word "planned" in this definition indicates that the curriculum is predesigned and planned by teachers and educational designers. In such a prescriptive approach to the curriculum, the experiences that are formed during the course of the curriculum are exclusive to the pre-planned experiences. While based on a descriptive approach to the curriculum, what is experienced by the learners during the course of the curriculum is beyond the pre-planned items (3,7). Generally, unplanned learning experiences are those that occur naturally during real contexts. They can happen through interactions, challenges, or unexpected events, and often lead to valuable insights or skills. In Health Profession Education, unpreparedness for unplanned experiences in real practice remains a problem despite changes in curricula from apprenticeship to outcome-based designs (8). Accordingly, in the definition of curriculum, not only pre-planned teaching-learning experiences, but also unplanned experiences of learners in real practice, and with different components of the educational environment not explicitly included in the formal curriculum, should also be taken into consideration.

Accordingly, the preceding discussion highlights the need to revise and redefine the mentioned definition in the following manner:

"Curriculum is a set of planned and unplanned learning experiences".

This revised definition recognizes the role of the learners and their learning experiences in the educational environment. Moreover, given that the learners' learning experiences are the result of formal and informal curricula, the emphasis of this definition on unplanned learning experiences that the learners achieve through the hidden curriculum is also worth mentioning (9,10).

Students will have many new experiences during their time at medical school, some of which are planned

within the curriculum, but other experiences will be unplanned, including peer relationships within and outside their teaching groups, as well as the numerous life-events that can occur, such as mental health issues or physical illness (11). It is noteworthy that unplanned experiences may not always align with the planned learning outcomes in the formal curriculum, and even in some cases, they can cause harmful effects on the teaching and learning process. Accordingly, it is the task of teachers to manage these undesirable effects by creating an appropriate learning environment, as well as supporting and counselling learners, to enhance the formal curriculum. In this way, teacher, as a teacher-scholar, creates an appropriate learning environment, in which individuals collaborate with each other in a flexible condition, reflect on their learning, implement the results, and are committed to environmental growth (12).

In addition, an essential role for all teachers is to meet students to explore how they are approaching learning and to identify any underlying issues that may be interfering with effective learning. Furthermore, increased awareness of issues pertaining to the hidden curriculum could allow for the further development of methods to address unplanned learning experiences within the hidden curriculum (9,10). In addition, helping students to develop their coping skills in reaction to unplanned events is the other essential aspect of student support. The central focus is usually on changing the emotional reaction to a stressful event by reinforcement of skills that are currently, or have been previously, used as adaptive, as well as proposing new coping skills (11). For example, in the field of medical education, by supporting students' learning within real clinical practice to feel psychologically safe, students make the most of any contact, planned and/or un-planned, with patients, peers and clinicians in any type of curriculum (8). It seems that the supportive environment created by institute, clinicians, and peers during medical education facilitates the conditions for participation and contribution of students to curriculum development, not only as a 'customer' but also as a 'partner' in education (13).

Considering dominancy of outcome-based approach in health profession education, which specifies the pre-planned educational experiences, a comprehensive definition of curriculum which encompass all of the planned and unplanned learning experiences of the learners during their educational program, is provided. Based on this definition, a more inclusive and student-centered approach to understanding curriculum, as well

as the need to create an inclusive, holistic, and authentic educational environment that supports and nurtures all aspects of student growth and development is emphasized. In this way, counselling activities are needed to support learners in their unplanned learning experiences, to align with the formal curriculum. The central focus of these activities is on addressing the learning interfering factors through reactive and proactive measures, in order to enhance students' learning and resilience. If these factors are identified and appropriately supported by peers, tutors and the environment of the medical school, all of the un-planned events can be intense periods of personal growth and development.

Note

It is important to note that in some dictionaries "education" has been translated into teaching and learning while in other sources 'the transfer of knowledge from teacher to learner is more pronounced.

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