CHAPTER

An Orientation to Curriculum

This chapter introduces information to help the reader

1. point out implications for curriculum developers of definitions of the word curriculum.
2. distinguish between microcurriculum and macrocurriculum.
3. describe the general flow of curriculum-development activity.
4. contrast varying philosophies of education.
5. describe basic positions of individuals who see (a) learning as behavior, (b) learning as perception, and (c) learning as development.
6. differentiate between direct influences and indirect influences on curriculum development.
7. explain several general orientations to curriculum development.

INTRODUCTION

Individuals’ conceptions of curriculum differ and their views are not just of theoretical importance. Actions of curriculum developers go forward within a certain framework of understanding. Not all curriculum workers have articulated a tight, personal definition of the term; nevertheless, their actions reflect a set of assumptions regarding its defining features.
Simply stated, what curriculum developers do is importantly influenced by their view of what curriculum is.

Because of the power of a given conception of curriculum to shape behavior, curriculum specialists need some understanding of alternative views of the term. They need, too, to understand philosophical influences, learning theory influences, and governmental and nongovernmental influences that affect curriculum specialists' behavior. For individuals, these forces come together and are interpreted in ways that give rise to a number of recognizable general orientations to curriculum.

DEFINING CURRICULUM

The word *curriculum* derives from an ancient Latin term meaning a "running course." Through time, its meaning evolved to include the idea of a "running" sequence of courses or learning experiences. In recent years, there have been many attempts to provide more specific definitions of curriculum.

Some authorities have viewed the term *curriculum* broadly. For example, Brubaker defined curriculum as "what persons experience in a setting" (Brubaker, 1982; p. 2). Such a definition pushes curriculum beyond its more traditional associations with schools and other instructional environments. It is so wide-ranging that virtually any life happening might be arguably considered to be within curriculum's domain.

Others have defined the term in more restricted ways. Tanner and Tanner (1980) described curriculum as, "that reconstruction of knowledge and experience, systematically developed under the auspices of the school (or university), to enable the learner to increase his or her control of knowledge and experience" (p. 43). This conception restricts the range of curriculum to plans for learning occurring within the school (or university) setting.

Individual definitions of curriculum also reflect different basic orientations. Some emphasize the content of the instructional program, as Phenix wrote: "the curriculum should consist entirely of knowledge which comes from the disciplines" (Phenix, 1962; p. 64).

Another curriculum orientation emphasizes the importance of curriculum as the plan for transmitting content rather than as the content itself. In this vein, Taba described "curriculum [as] ... a plan for learning" (Taba, 1962; p. 11). Oliva continued this tradition more recently, describing curriculum as "a plan or program for all the experiences which the learner encounters under the direction of the school" (Oliva, 1982; p. 10).

Varying conceptions of curriculum carry with them different expectations about what curriculum developers should do. For example, some-
one subscribing to Phenix's (1962) definition of curriculum might expect curriculum developers' primary responsibilities to be finished once content elements from the disciplines had been identified. On the other hand, someone committed to Oliva's (1982) view of curriculum might expect curriculum developers to plan for everything that logically could be thought of as the responsibility of the school. For example, developers might be obligated to plan much of the extracurricular program as well as the academic program. Debates as to the proper range of curriculum developers' responsibilities, as the Phenix (1962) and Oliva (1982) definitions of curriculum suggest, have characterized much dialogue in the field. Figure 1-1 enumerates some alternative definitions of curriculum.

Many traditional definitions of curriculum have tended to be schoolcentric in their conception. Large numbers of them reference planning for learning in the schools, but education today occurs in many settings. For example, the military services provide many kinds of training experiences in nonschool settings. Public service agencies such as the Red

---

**FIGURE 1-1 Alternative Definitions of Curriculum: Their Implications**

Through the years, many definitions of curriculum have been proposed. Look at the following samples of definitions. Then respond to the questions at the bottom.

A. Curriculum is the school's adopted program of studies.

B. Curriculum consists of contents of the various courses taught in the school.

C. Curriculum involves planned interactions among instructors, learners, and learning resources in the school or in other appropriate instructional settings.

D. Curriculum encompasses all of the experiences offered to learners under the authority of the school or under the authority of other appropriate instructional agencies.

E. Curriculum includes all planned and unplanned experiences of learners in the school and in other appropriate instructional settings.

1. What are the limits of curriculum specialists' responsibilities, given each definition?

2. What do you see as strengths and weaknesses of each definition?

3. Which of these definitions is closest to your own view of "curriculum"?
Cross, the Boy Scouts, the Girl Scouts, the YMCA, and the YWCA provide extensive training services for staff members. Human relations operations and training and development arms in industries offer employees many educational opportunities. Hence the term curriculum needs to be thought of in terms of its applicability to many educational settings.

The definition proposed here is consistent with the tradition that views the curriculum as a plan for learning rather than as the content of learning. It is broad enough to encompass a variety of educational settings and to accommodate a number of philosophical and psychological orientations: *A curriculum is a master plan for selecting and organizing learning experiences for the purpose of changing and developing learners’ behaviors and insights.*

While this conception incorporates a number of perspectives, it should not be accepted as *the* correct definition. It reflects some priorities the writer considers to be important. Others, quite properly, may disagree. As Beane, Toepfer, and Alessi (1986) have pointed out, "... If one selects one definition to have 'most favored status,' one should still recognize that several definitions do exist and are just as favored by others. Thus, they cannot be rejected lightly since all have advantages and disadvantages" (p. 35).

**LEVELS OF CURRICULUM WORK**

Curriculum work occurs at many levels. In central school district offices and within large corporate training divisions, highly trained curriculum specialists lay out general designs for programs that may influence hundreds of teachers and instructors and thousands of learners. Written curriculum documents at this very general planning level, sometimes called *general scope and sequence documents*, may be many volumes in length. Large-scale curriculum work of this type is sometimes referred to as *macrocurriculum*.

Not all curriculum work is done on such a grand scale. The effort of individual instructors to lay out instructional units and lesson plans also constitutes legitimate curriculum activity. Instructional unit plans and lesson plans, which often result from this activity, are the written expression of curriculum work that is sometimes called *microcurriculum*.

There is no precise line of demarcation between macrocurriculum and microcurriculum. The more curriculum work focuses on the development of widely applicable guidelines and provides relatively few specific details about how programs are to be implemented, the more it tends toward macrocurriculum. The more it results in the design of instructional programs for a specific group and the greater the degree of specificity provided in terms of what the teacher or instructor should do, the more it tends toward microcurriculum.