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Dream Curriculum: an Inquiry into the Arena of Curriculum Development within the Matrix of Holistic Education in Iran

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Abstract: Daring to dream is the key to revolutionary changes in Education of developing countries. It helps them get a more holistic picture of what they have previously been dealing with in separated and seemingly unrelated chunks in education. Curriculum development and curriculum dreaming, regarded as inseparable within the matrix of Holistic Education, are so pivotal in any educational reforms. Our main concern in this critique is delving into the arena of curriculum studies, focusing on holistic education, to re-conceptualize the meaning of curriculum, as a flexible, ongoing, learner focused, and lifelong process that involves teacher as facilitator and learner, the natural world as the school, and considering the future as well as present needs of students for a peaceful cooperative world, and propose a model for change for schools in developing countries like Iran. Acknowledging students' and teachers' indigenous Persian knowledge, this model invites them to know their body, mind and soul, "global self", within the world in which they live, "global village" and take a journey from their inner world to outer world and from their birthplace to the whole globe.

Keywords: Curriculum Development, Holistic Education

Introduction

In this paper, we discuss our own dream curriculum for global education, a clear and practical example of holistic curriculum, by focusing on participatory education and then relating it to the larger field identified by the term "curriculum studies". We use the term "dream curriculum" to describe a kind of curriculum we would hope to see one day. It is a curriculum that is not yet a present reality in our country, Iran.

After illustrating the present situation in Iran, we will first provide various meanings of curriculum and our own understanding of curriculum. Then, we will provide a brief description of global education (a holistic paradigm) as it may be found in the literature, and as we understand and apply it to our own practice. We will elaborate on what is meant by curriculum studies and curriculum development, and will explain briefly, how and why to infuse the holistic curriculum (global education) into the present curriculum of our school, and suggest it to be used in other schools in our country, Iran, and countries with almost the same social situation. We will conclude by illustrating how holistic curriculum may function as a model for change in education offered at more schools in developing countries like Iran. And finally we will describe how our dream curriculum if properly programmed, correctly implemented, and accurately evaluated may have a dramatic effect on the outcome of the present

curriculum of our country, especially in elementary level.

This proposed model for change will provide learners and teachers with a way of knowing their body, mind and soul, "global self", within the world in which they live, "global village" (Nordgren, R. D. 2003). By infusing concepts of holistic education into the schooling system in Iran, students-as-learners and teachers-as-learners will then be invited and encouraged to take a journey from their inner world to outer world and from their birthplace to the whole globe (Pike, G., 1999). Throughout the work, we recognize the strong presence of indigenous Persian knowledge as it emerges from the storied classical literature of the country.

The present situation in Iran

As educational specialists, involved in and accountable for the job of curriculum development in a large educational community for almost 20 years and dealing with the task of syllabus design for some years at a university, we were almost convinced that curriculum was nothing more than a set of subject matters in a discipline, with prescribed goals and expectations for learning. Within this (mistaken) image, we used to think that curriculum outcomes for schools had to be predetermined to the extent that they were to correspond pedagogically to the goals and directives received from the state officials.

As far as we remember, in our educational system curriculum was defined by the subject areas of math, science, social science, and language. It was based on specified resources, mandated by the government, and almost always clearly prescribed for the teacher and the student. Curriculum was prescribed and pre-determined by the number of lessons to be covered, resources (which were often limited to a few course books), pre-determined time intervals, grade, and step-by-step guidelines for its implementation. It was a kind of “dominant banking model of education” (Freire, P., 2000) which ignored the active and constructive role of teacher and student in curriculum development. Presumably, the best a curriculum could do was to tell the teachers what to teach and how to teach it at schools. For us, this was curriculum. This was going on at the time we were teachers in schools, and coordinators in the educational arenas of the country. Today, more or less, the same mentality dominates our educational system. Coordinators as well as other school overseers are just watchers to guarantee that programs are implemented according to the predetermined directions.

What is curriculum?

“The Curriculum program is a forum for systematic reflection on the substance... purposes, and practices used for bringing about learning in educational setting. Of concern are such fundamental issues as: what would be studied? why? by whom? and in what setting?...” (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, Graduate Studies in Education, 2002/2003 Bulletin, p.59)

Recognizing that the term curriculum means “different things to different people” (Connelly, F. M., 1988) and that it carries a multiplicity of meanings, we would anchor our understanding of the term curriculum in its etymological roots. Curriculum, from the Latin *currere*, carries two shades of meaning: ‘to run a course’ (practicing a race with a pre-determined goal) or ‘the running of a course’. That implies, to *experience* the process of running a race (Pinar, W.F., 1995). It is the latter meaning, emphasizing curriculum as a *process* that informs our approach to holistic education. We will preserve it within the larger field of curriculum studies.

Curriculum, meaning ‘to run the course’, is no more applicable nowadays when the education is no more school based, as it was traditionally (Pinar, W.F., 1981). Instead, it is learner focused, anywhere, anytime, with the teacher acting as facilitator, and the natural world as the school for acquiring/producing knowledge by the learners and the teachers.

When reviewing his own work, in the field of curriculum, William Pinar suggested that “something is underway, ... the precise form ... is not yet known... what appears possible is not only a reconceived and reborn field of curriculum, but also the introduction to intellectual life in... new age” (Pinar, W. F., 1976, p.29). Eventually, this observation led Pinar (and many others after him) to a re-conceptualized view of curriculum.

To illustrate this further, we refer to the class notes of Diamond (2003) who indicates that curriculum is not limited to “the stuff I teach in Math, Science, or History”, but it is presumably the outcome of a rigorously researched and educated endeavor for studying the present and future needs of a generation of learners who belong to another setting. Many scholars argue how the future will be another time much different from now. As such, the notion of citizenship for that future will differ too. More definitely, the people of tomorrow will be much different from what we are today. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) believe that a public education mandate means to train – instead of teaching how to learn – in the widest sense of the term “curriculum”.

Sadly, in many places, including Iran, the curriculum designers of the educational organizations, such as schools, and other institutes have little choice to explore a “problem-solving inquiry orientation to learning” (Wells and Both, 1994). Too often, government officials prescribe subjects, and schools are obliged and directed to implement them exactly as they have been programmed. Educators have no other choice but practice the received directions slavishly. This trend not only ignores the current needs of the learners in a rapidly changing world, but also it will turn their encounter with the future into a disastrous disappointing one.

This situation needs to be changed because the learners are learning how to dictate what they are dictated to. This change is possible through leaving the practice based education behind and venture into a new kind of experience-focused curriculum in the country that includes the direct involvement of the teacher and the learner (Connelly, F. M., 1988). In other words, it involves developing a “subject-based student-centered curriculum” (Pike, G., 1999) that is implemented on the basis of participatory approach of education. It implies a teaching–learning involvement in which the children will acquire and practice how to cooperate rather than compete. It calls for much needed collaboration, not competition. Such a curriculum experience will prepare this generation for global citizenship for the present and the future of the globe.

O’Sullivan (2001) argues persuasively that every educational system must equip people with an understanding of where their society is headed. He believes that the present century, the century of

economy, is inevitably about to give way to a new century of the environment and sustainable development, otherwise our planet faces definite social disintegration and environmental collapse in no time. He adds that environmentalists must, as a result, be asking profound questions about the content of what is taught. This needs to start with a deep understanding of the historic transition, which all our societies are about to be compelled to make. O'Sullivan argues that the fundamental task of educators is to introduce into curricula at all levels a grasp of what is wrong with the modern era, why it will be replaced, and a vision of possible new directions. It goes almost without saying that the intellectual tools, ethical values, and practical skills required for a more humane, green, and peaceful world are different from what is taught today in many schools around the world.

What is global education? [A more holistic paradigm]

David Selby, a prominent global educator, defines global education as

an approach to education that's based upon the interconnectedness of communities, lands, and peoples, the interrelatedness of all social, cultural and natural phenomena, links between past, present and future, and the complementary nature of the cognitive, affective, physical and spiritual dimensions of the human being. It addresses issues of development, equity, peace, social and environmental justice, and environmental sustainability. It encompasses the personal, the local, the national and the planetary. Along with these principles, its approach to teaching and learning is experiential, interactive, children-centered, democratic, convivial, participatory, and change-oriented." (Selby, 2003, class notes)

Holistic education, along with many other fields and disciplines, cannot be planned, enacted, and evaluated based on a fixed and prescribed curriculum. Most concepts of education, as Selby (2003, *class notes*) argues, should be "reconceptualized". International development, modernization, peace, rights and justice, world health, and economic developments should be redefined and grasped based on filling the gap of human's basic needs (not their greed) and helping them to find/devise safe ways for supplying themselves in the society.

Thus holistic curriculum can be thought of as a special program for a diagnosed and systemic reflection on global substances including subject matters like global history of the world, world geography, earth ecology, and earth education,

whole globe political and economic principles, and courses like peace education, environmental and humane education, carrying equity and justice at its core. Holistic education as an integrated curriculum (Clark, Jr., E.T., 2002) is actually cross-curricular delivery rather than working on a special subject matter. To do this a new curriculum is needed which we name our "dream curriculum". A small poem by (Sadi, 1184- 1292) on global unity may help us to make the issue clearer:

*"Humans are organs of the same body,
originated from the same basis and enjoy a
common creation value.*

*Any suffering to any organ
affects the rest simultaneously".*

*"Crush not on ant, who stores the golden grain
He lives with pleasure, and dies with pain
Learn from him rather to secure the spoil
Of patient cares and preserving toil."*

Our dream curriculum

We will try to shape our dream curriculum for the elementary schools in Iran based on the following words:

"How we think is influenced by what we think about and we choose or are expected to represent its content" (Eisner, E. W. 1993, p.7)

A child-centered, learner-focused, subject-based (Pike, G., 1999), interdisciplinary, and holistic paradigm, in which humanity is at the core, ethics as basis, environmental justice as its umbrella, science and mathematics as means not an end, and justice and equity as its goal constitutes our dream curriculum. The above disciplines need knowledge to be learned, concepts to be understood, and skills to be mastered / developed... by the learners. Thus our dream curriculum will be planned by inquiring into the views of students, teachers, parents, and the authorities. It will be implemented by equally active participation of all of them (students, teachers, parents, and the authorities) as learners. Evaluation becomes self-evaluation and will be done through looking at learners' achievements, by observing their cooperation, reflecting before deciding, self-determination, and proper decision-making. Some issues should be experienced, some observed, some heard about, and some should be grasped through intuition (Miller, R., 2008; Miller, J.P., 2000), some knowledge should be produced, some skills grasped, and some attitudes attained (Freire, B., 2000; Connelly, F. M., 1988).

In our dream curriculum all aspects of humans/learners including their body, mind and soul (Miller, J.P., 2000), will be taken into consideration. Teachings from the past as a literature of the ecology

of the country will be included into the curriculum. Learning about and for reflection, self-esteem, skills of meditation, visualization, and dreaming will be integrated into the corresponding subjects. Teachers will view themselves as learners, and will receive enough education, experience, practice on knowledge producing, experience and intuition-based education, and participatory approach of learning before they are given a chance to begin their facilitating cooperation with their students. This curriculum is focused to help the learners achieve their future needs. A small story from Persian literature may make the issue clearer.

Once a young man was passing along a road when he came across an old man who was planting a fruit tree in an orchard. 'What are you doing?' the young man asked. 'Planting fruit trees' the old man answered. 'You don't live that long to enjoy the fruit' the young man criticized. 'It is all right' the old man said. 'Others cultivated we ate, we cultivate, others will eat.' He continued. (Sa'adi, 13th century)

All in all, in our dream curriculum learners are not only able to take care of themselves but also are able to take care of the ecological and cultural legacies of the past and needs of the future generations and species.

Plan of curriculum

According to many educators including Mahdavinia(2012); Diamond (2003); Clark (2002); Connelly and Clandinin(1988); ... the curriculum planner should have a particular focus on what s/he wants to do. In other words the what, why, for who, in what setting, based on which philosophy, and how, are among the main factors that any curriculum developer should keep in mind before beginning to work on a curriculum planning. This would be an inquiry based approach to curriculum development (Alquist, E., 1996), and we will deal with it by inquiring into the views of learners, teachers, parents, and the stakeholders. And in order to address the curriculum-planning questions, we will apply some general global contexts by infusing them into the present elementary curriculum (as a pilot study) of the country, Iran.

As we seek to address the “what” of the curriculum, the first step will be to conceptualize subject areas such as language, science, math, and social science in their global contexts and look for a corresponding approach to implement it in the classroom or as class outing education. All subjects including, international relationships, cultural dialogues, environment, gender issues, peace and justice, trade and developments, world health (Pike, G., 1999), and local literature will be tackled with and planned according to the age, and gender of the learners.

The next question is “why”. Contextual reason of the curriculum should be integrated into the materials and the implementation approach of education. It is the learner who will learn how to avoid conflicts and how to think about solving the problems through negotiations and cooperation and sharing thoughts with others. Concepts, skills and knowledge can be grasped through integrating them into other subjects. Language is one of the best subjects that a lot of these concepts can be integrated into. Samavati (2012), states that contexts created by games in language teaching can engage children’s multiple intelligence and teach them problem solving skills and prepare them for their future lives. We can also look at Zarin Shoja’s(2012) “Mother Nature’s Tongue” which illustrates his practical approach to language curriculum development for purposes beyond language learning itself. He has benefited from art as a setting to integrate life skills, ethics, and environmental sensitivity into language education because he believes

As teachers of English (or any other subject matter) we should direct the attention of our students way beyond good marks in standardized tests, ‘tea and tourism’, and fluency in a language. Our bleeding Mother Nature, our segregated lives, and our alienated Selves cannot be cured by a generation merely educated for such trivial purposes.(Zarin Shoja, E., 2012,pp.4-5)

As far as “for who” is concerned, we see the learner as a “holistic learner” (Pike, G., 1999), who is supposed to understand where s/he is, at what time and age s/he is, and finally who s/he personally is - culturally, socially, and ecologically (Pike, G., 1999).

“By who” also plays an important role, because it is the teacher, who needs to understand what kind of a teacher a “global teacher” is? According to Selby (2003), a global teacher is one who is global centric, and concerned about culture and perspective. This teacher is future oriented(while catering to learners’ “Here and Now”), facilitator, appreciative to human potential, concerned with the development of the whole person, expert in employing a range of teaching and learning styles in the classroom, able to see the learning as a lifelong process, and finally one who is a community teacher.

Maybe the most important question is “how”. According to Miller (2008), holistic curriculum can best be implemented by participatory education and educational activities, in class, and out of class.

Ultimately, as curriculum planners we have to be able to answer: how will we know how best we have learned? According to Alquist (1996), global learners can best be assessed through observation. She adds that all students are observed often and regularly, with the teacher taking a focus varying from wide angle, first on the whole class, and then on one

student, or activity, and from non-participant to participant. Another method is performance assessment. Portfolios are, as Diamond (2003) suggests, also a very useful exhibition of an active mind at work.

Conclusion

Since a long time ago many thinkers have dreamed their ideal curricula and sometimes tried to put their dreams into practice; Some became well-known (Plato, Rousseau, Rudolf Steiner, Paulo Freire, Dewey, Montessori etc.) and some remained unknown; Some dream curricula were realized in their dreamers' lifetime and some enjoyed popularity after their dreamers; Some dreams crossed the borders and some were suppressed and buried at the heart of their dreamers. Many factors should work hand in hand to bring a dream curriculum into realization: factors like individual will, policy and power, socio-cultural factors, local and global needs etc. Thus we have a long way to the realization of our dream curriculum.

Through introducing the present educational situation especially in elementary level in Iran, and going through the detailed meaning of the curriculum and curriculum studies at this postmodern era, we have tried to present a clear definition of global education as a paradigm of holistic learning and how this education can be put into a corresponding curriculum. Building on studies of scholars like Pinar (1995, 1981), Connelly (1988), Diamond (2003), Connelly and Clandinin (1988), Wells and Both (1994), and O'Sullivan (2001), we have related this to the broader field of curriculum studies. We have presented some compelling reasons how the education at the elementary school level in a developing country like Iran can be changed. We have proposed an infusion of global education as an example of holistic learning into the main curriculum of the country. We have introduced our own dream curriculum for the above purpose and talked about how this curriculum can be planned, implemented and assessed.

When striving to make this dream become a reality, we foresee that the learners not only will learn much about the necessary global knowledge and skills, but also will be changed into inquisitive inquirers, independent thinkers, collaborative communicators, thoughtful risk takers, and principled and open minded life-long learners.

In the end, building on the studies of scholars like Kitchen et al (2011), we would like to suggest that if guided by a narrative understanding of curriculum studies, the infusion of global education in the classrooms of elementary schools in Iran may lead students (and their teachers) to true *currere*: they will run a curricular course that will enhance them as

whole persons within themselves and their communities in the world in which they live.

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