Formation of school subjects as curriculum content: patterns and structures.

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Curriculum and school subject formation in retrospect

In a classic curriculum theory article, William Pinar (1978) divided curriculum research into ‘traditional’, ‘conceptual-empiricist’ and ‘reconceptualist’ categories. Depending on within which of these perspectives you choose to deal with curriculum questions you will look at the formation of school subjects and curriculum content from different angles. Within the first two perspectives curriculum content is seen as directly related to results from scientific disciplines, however more sophisticated in the conceptual-empiricist perspective than in the traditional. Both these perspectives rely on scientific progress and emphasize adjustment of the curriculum to scientifically investigated demands of the needs of the technological society. Within this perspective school subjects also seem to be created as simplifications of scientific content.

Within the reconceptualist tradition, in time closely related to the new sociology of education, Ivor Goodson (1983, 1988) and Tom Popkewitz ed. (1987) did show in their curriculum history research how school subjects rather were legitimized and mythologized by their association with scientific disciplines. Goodson presented a model for the development of school subjects – invention, promotion, legislation and mythologization – and asserted that the representatives of a school subject, when it was established, developed a rhetoric of legitimization that prevented further change.

Tom Popkewitz developed in earlier work (Popkewitz 1976, 1977) that curriculum content construction based on the discipline-centred principle (which can be seen as a variant of the conceptualist-empiricist perspective) ignored the social nature of knowledge and the differing approaches existing in various disciplines, and also that the scientific logic reconstructed did not reflect the conflicts existing in the real-life scientific community. This claim went back on a statement by him, that social sciences “involved continual
conflict among members about the purpose and direction of study” (Popkewitz 1977 p. 42) and he meant that syllabuses and teaching materials often presented a uniform systems view of the social context, describing society as a closed system whose parts work together in stable harmony (Popkewitz 1976, 1977). This kind of approach is also realized in the study edited by Popkewitz 1987 and it also goes together with the more general curriculum history studies presented at the same time by Kliebard (1986) and Franklin (1986, cf. Englund 1991) as well as the thesis put forward by Meyer et al (1992) that there seems to exist a shared world primary curriculum demonstrating that “a high proportion of the forces shaping national curricular outlines are to be found at the world rather than the national or subnational levels” (Meyer et al 1992 p. 172). However, as Hopmann (19923) stresses in his review, “the study does not take into account that one and the same heading may have completely different meanings depending on the context in which it is placed” (p. 481).

So, while the political and ideological character of the curriculum was analysed and showed by educational researchers related to the new sociology of education, it was often seen as determined and locked in into a bureaucratic rationality (Kliebard), mythologized visions (Goodson) and being the same all over the world (Meyer) etc. These kinds of analyses were seldom or not at all interested in different interpretations or pointing out the potential for an education of another fashion than one locked in into a pattern of reproduction and social control.

In my own diss (Englund 1986) I made use of many of the advantages put forward by the new sociology of education, but I rejected at the same time some of its what I conceptualized as over-determined theoretical perspective giving no room for different interpretations of school subject contents. What I tried to show instead was that the selective tradition was an important part of school subjects, but that there also was room for different choices of content and teaching both at a more general level with an ongoing struggle between different educational conceptions and at a school subject level. Inspired by Barr; Barth & Shermis’ (1977) analysis of social studies and related to citizenship education I (Englund 1986 ch. 9) distinguished five different ways of its purpose, choosing content and teaching methods:

1. Traditionally valuebased citizenship transmission (national values, obey-oriented) with a concentric principle of teaching.
2. Preparation for the labour market / employability-oriented citizenship transmission for a society in change focusing on individual competence.
3. Preparation for active, participatory citizenship by critical institutional analyses and a manifest/latent perspective of conflict.
4. A social science based social studies with the underlying social science disciplines as reference points.
5. Problem-oriented teaching based on pupil experiences.

Almost at the same time Roberts (1987) developed seven different curriculum emphases for science education (later on further developed by Östman 1995): 1) The correct explanation emphasis, 2) The structure of science emphasis, 3) The scientific skill development emphasis, 4) The solid foundation emphasis, 5) An everyday coping emphasis, 6) A science, technology and decisions emphasis and 7) The self as explainer emphasis.

What I primarily want to stress with these two examples is that we here have starting points for how to analyse different interpretations of school subjects. Even if there are selective traditions and dominant ways of interpreting school subjects there are also, all the time, more or less profiled alternatives constituting didactic typologies and different emphases.

But are we, as researchers and teachers, thinking and acting in that way? How do we deal with questions of interpreting different school subjects? One line of reasoning in today’s hunting the results of the schools – what and how do they learn? which ways are the best ones towards efficient learning? and so on - there seem to be a consensus of the crucial role of the teacher and especially of his or her didactic competence. But wouldn’t we think of this problem also in terms of how different school subjects are defined and interpreted and also how they are worked with.

**School subject studies of today – the need of didactic problematization**

In a recent article with the same object as the studies mentioned by Goodson and Popkewitz, namely the formation of school subjects in a curriculum perspective, by Zongyi Deng (2009) we can witness the shadow of the first two traditions mentioned in the introduction to this article, and perhaps especially the traditional, bureaucratic one but now within the current discourse of educational standards and accountability “which is undergirded
by a very narrow and reductive notion of curriculum content” (p. 586). The
author is proposing the general claim “that a school subject is a distinctive
purpose-built enterprise, constructed in response to social, cultural, and
political demands and challenges toward educative ends” (p. 598). To that I
want to respond that this proposal of course is possible in a specific case, but
not necessarily in general and I also want to stress that such a view (purpose-
built enterprise) in my ears sounds too evolutionary and underestimates the
struggle of the formation of school subjects and its curriculum content.

What this view of the formation of a school subject also neglects, I think, is
that there are different interpretations of how to ‘curricularize’ a specific
subject – what is the most important knowledge? How should the school
subject perspectivize different things and so on?

I think that it is necessary to once again, and perhaps today with many new
tools and insights like the crucial role of the encounter between the teacher
and the students (no education without relation), our recent understanding of
the language and communication in use in the meaning creating processes
and different subject-specific ways of learning and knowing and so on,
analyse the many possible interpretations of different school subjects.

Towards the need for a reconceptualist understanding with room for
different interpretations of school subjects

So, what I want to revitalize by this paper is an understanding of the
formation of school subjects and curriculum content, which rests on a kind
of reconceptualist understanding but neither with the prescribed
developments of a school subject sketched by Goodson nor as a purpose-
built enterprise as seen by Deng. I will rather try to (re)develop and
restructure a perspective of the formation of the curriculum content where
social forces and social groups like e.g. subject teachers associations are
struggling for and defending different purposes concerning education and
where the different ways of choosing content and teach are the results of
ongoing struggles over the establishments and the ‘correct’ interpretations of
school subjects and curriculum contents (Englund 1986, 1997ab, 2007). This
view of the curriculum content and school subjects imply seeing them as
contingent and possible to interpret and realize in different ways, politically
contested at all levels and ever-changing in relation to the struggle between
different social forces.
I do view my earlier presented didactic typology for social studies and Roberts’ emphases of science education as possible reference points for future analyses of this kind, but at the same time I find it necessary to put the question of how to create new kinds of didactic typologies for different school subjects of today.

But how, in what way would different school subject intentions, or shall we call it different literacy intentions, be investigated and distinguished from each other? Some of what has been said up to now would do as a starting point, but I think that to understand different literacy intentions is also very much a question of understanding relations, the pedagogy of relation and the insights of that perspective (cf. Bingham & Sidorkin 2004 and Englund ed. 2004). “The first of these insights is about the intersubjective and communicative character of the encounter between teachers and students and between students. The second insight is about the potentially different meanings through the choices (primarily by the teacher) of the teaching content as an offer of meaning. The third insight is about teaching and its always present and possible relationship with the political and moral dimensions and to the aspect of democracy. The field taking form is about the experiences (in a wider sense) that teachers and students have a possibility to live through in schools and the importance of democracy as norm within that field“ (Englund 2004, p. 14 my tr., cf. Englund 1998).

There are some examples of that kind of studies in Englund ed 2004 and what might be underlined is that these kinds of studies are not just studies of different traditions found in curriculum documents, textbooks and the general school subject debate. This kind of studies – to find out different interpretations and different ways of working within a school subject – can of course also be made by analyzing teachers in their ongoing work. One example here is a study made by Eva Hultin (2006), who starts by referring to dominating didactic typologies in literature teaching and supplements these typologies by doing both text analysis of curricular documents and finally distinguishes four different conversation genres in the teaching of literature. With that kind of results we could have a sophisticated collection of different ways of teaching/communicating in its broadest sense – different ways of choosing content, of how to communicate that content, of how the play between the teacher and the students is organized and so on. This collection would be a base, a reservoir for didactic discussions among teachers and others.
To summarize this section I have tried to show that curriculum content is always socially constructed and might be a result of struggling social forces giving way for different interpretations, interpretations that lean on different political and ideological visions, but also that curriculum and school subjects in practice are interpreted, designed and performed by unique teachers in ways that we might try to characterize for further comparisons and evaluations.

**From curriculum studies to didactics**

One specific reason to analyse curriculum content and school subjects in the way developed in this article has been to show how school subjects may be interpreted and realized in very different ways. The need for teachers to get to know their school subjects in such a way (historically, consequences of different choices of content and ways of teaching for different groups of students) that they can deliberate (with each other) and with discerning abilities make the optimal choices of how and what to teach and communicate with their students is perhaps the most crucial kind of knowledge for them, the teachers. It can be seen as a kind of twist of the ‘pedagogical content knowledge’ introduced by Lee Shulman (1987) and is the kind of didactic knowledge demanded today by both educational researchers and authorities dealing with what is happening in schools (cf. Engelsen 2010, Skolverket 2009).

Going back here to Deng (2009) it can be stressed that “teachers’ understanding of curriculum content has become a central focus of discourse on teacher-education reform over the two last decades. Most of the discourse has been influenced by the conceptual framework of Shulman and his associates at Stanford university – a framework predicated on the necessity of teachers’ understanding and transformation of the content of an academic discipline ………. What seems to be undermined are the curriculum-making processes entailed in the formation of a school subject – processes that determine and shape the nature and character of curriculum content, and, thereby, teachers’ understanding of curriculum content” (Deng 2009 pp. 586-587). If, as said earlier by Deng (cf. Deng & Luke 2008), school subjects are “uniquely purpose-built educational enterprises, designed with and through an educational imagination toward educational ends” (Deng & Luke 2008 p. 83), how open for conflicts and struggles between different
interests and social forces in curriculum and school subject formation should future investigations be? Curriculum documents and within them plans for teaching in different school subjects have to be compromise documents (cf. Englund 1986), but how much of different interests and perspectives should they expose and make explicit for further teacher interpretations and deliberations?

References:


