Studying Curriculum: Toward a Social Constructionist Perspective

Ivor Goodson

University of Western Ontario
One of the perennial problems of studying curriculum is that it is a multifaceted concept constructed, negotiated, and renegotiated at a variety of levels and in a variety of arenas. This elusiveness has no doubt contributed to the rise of theoretical and overarching perspectives—psychological, philosophical, and sociological—as well as more technical or scientific paradigms. But these perspectives and paradigms have been criticized recurrently because they do violence to the practical essentials of curriculum as conceived of and realized.

In this paper, I argue that we need to move firmly and sharply away from decontextualized and disembodied modes of analysis whether they be philosophical, psychological, or sociological; away from technical, rational, or scientific management models—away from the “objectives games.” Above all, we need to move away from a singular focus on curriculum as prescription. This means that we must embrace fully the notion of curriculum as social construction first at the level of prescription itself, but also at the levels of process and practice.

Curriculum as Prescription

The primacy of the ideology of curriculum as prescription (CAP) can be evidenced in even a cursory glimpse at curriculum literature. This view of curriculum develops from a belief that we can dispassionately define the main ingredients of the course of study and then proceed to teach the various segments and sequences in systematic turn. Despite the obvious simplicity, not to say crudity, of this view the objectives game is still, if “not the only game in town,” certainly the main game. There may be many reasons for this continuing predominance, but explanatory potential is not, I think, one of the factors.

Curriculum as prescription supports important mystiques about state schooling and society. Most notably CAP supports the mystique that expertise and control reside within central government, educational bureaucracies, or the university community. Providing nobody exposes this mystique, the two worlds of “prescription rhetoric” and “schooling as practice” can coexist. Both sides benefit from such peaceful coexistence. The agencies of CAP are seen to be “in control” and the schools are seen to be “delivering” (and can carve out a good degree of autonomy if they accept the rules). Curriculum prescriptions thereby set certain parameters but with transgression and occasional transcendence being permissible as long as the rhetoric of prescription and management is not challenged.

Of course there are “costs of complicity” in accepting the myth of prescription; above all these involve, in various ways, acceptance of established modes of power relations. Perhaps most importantly the people intimately connected with the day-to-day social construction of curriculum and schooling, the teachers are thereby effectively disenfranchised in the “discourse of schooling.” To continue to
exist, their day-to-day power must basically remain unspoken and unrecorded. This, then, is the price of complicity. The vestiges of day-to-day power and autonomy for schools and for teachers are dependent on continuing to accept the fundamental lie.

With regard to curriculum study the "costs of complicity" are ultimately catastrophic. For the historic compromise we have described has led to the displacement of a whole field of study. It has led to the directing of scholarship into fields which service the mystique of central and/or bureaucratic control. For scholars who benefit from maintaining this mystique—in the universities particularly—this complicity is, to say the least, self-serving.

**Constructing Complicity: An Instance**

Having rid myself of this short polemical diatribe, let me offer an illustration relating to theories and definitions of objectives as they relate to school subject knowledge, my own particular field of interest. Here my primary concern is with British work, but there are analogies with US and Canadian scholarships. In doing this I am aiming not to scrutinize the political and pragmatic efficiency of the notion of curriculum as prescription, but rather to focus on the explanatory and practical potential of work allied to this prescriptive mode. By concentrating on one aspect of curriculum in this manner, it may be possible to further elucidate the way in which intellectual versions of prescriptive theory originate and operate.

While psychological theory may have provided the most basic and general support, particularly in the scientific management structures mentioned earlier, philosophy has been of substantial and undoubted import with respect to school subjects and it is from philosophy that I draw my illustrations. I do not at this point want to intrude too far on the debate between the philosophical absolutists and social relativists: plainly a dialogue of the deaf. My concern is rather to characterize the implicit posture of philosophy with regard to the school curriculum.

At its heart, philosophy seems to hold itself well above the fray of curriculum as existing and as currently realized. The core of this aloofness is a commitment to rational and logical pursuit: that element of the dispassionate and apolitical so vital in the rhetoric of prescription. But the other side of this coin is a resistance to the force of social influence. It is as if the philosopher searches for truths beyond social interference. This is even true of more liberal philosophers. Take Hirst (1965) for instance; objective knowledge he says

> is a form of education knowing no limits other than those necessarily imposed by the nature of rational knowledge and thereby developing in man the final court of appeal in all human affairs. (p. 127)

Or Pring (1972):
Forms of knowledge therefore are fundamental structures picked out by characteristic concepts and characteristic tests of truth. They are not options open to us; they constitute what it means to think and they characterise all our particular judgments. (p. 27)

The “philosopher king” knows only “truth” then; there are no options for they have access to a truth beyond culture and beyond history.

At a certain level of discourse this may well be a sustainable position. But facing the process of teaching forms of knowledge are we still in a position where “they are not options open to us”? On this point some of the philosophers show signs of almost human ambivalence. Others, however, have the strength of their convictions. Phenix (1968), for instance, deliberately equates the disciplines with teachability:

My theme has been that the curriculum should consist entirely of knowledge which comes from the disciplines, for the reason that the disciplines reveal knowledge in its teachable forms. (p. 133)

Phenix’s statement reveals, I think, the likely policy outcome of the more recently dominant philosophical mode of theorizing. Whatever the qualifications, whatever the studied detachment, the likely effect of the posture will be prescriptive theorizing. From a certainty that “there are no options” it is clear that prescriptive objectives for schooling will be both the expectation and the culmination.

The extent to which philosophy has in fact contributed to prescriptive theorizing can be seen in a wide range of curriculum books from specialists of all kinds, the work of Bruner and Phenix in the United States through to Lawton and Peters in the United Kingdom. Lawton (1975) is a particularly useful example of how the curriculum specialist receives the messages of the philosopher. Lawton argues that for Hirst:

The theory seems to me to run as follows: The first principle is that we should be clear about our educational goals. The second is that “the central objectives of education are developments of the mind.”

He adds later

I have included Hirst’s viewpoint here as an example of curriculum planning which is largely “non-cultural” in the sense of being transcultural. This is because Hirst sees the curriculum largely in terms of knowledge, and the structure and organisation of knowledge is, by his analysis, universal rather than culturally based. (p. 18)

But the crucial point to note is that the results are all too clear in the real world, however studied the detachment. We end up with a focus on educational goals, we end up with prescription. Also we end up with prescriptions of a particular sort based on “developments of the mind.” The result is classically contradictory: a posture which is noncultural validating an explicit specific and identifiable cul-
tural product. Philosophy then leads us "beyond culture" in pursuit of truth and above all leads to curriculum theories which allow us to "be clear about our educational goals" and to focus down on goals which sponsor developments of the mind.

However, the believers in educational goals based on the disciplines have ultimately to face the sad truth that the world of schooling as it currently exists is played on a pitch where scoring goals is difficult and where the goalposts are not always relevant. There is a tearful little section in Lawton (1975) headed "Disciplines but not subjects." Here the confrontation between philosophical and prescriptive truth and curriculum reality leads to peculiar paroxysms to escape culpability for the prescription's failures. Hence Lawton writes:

There is no reason why a curriculum based on disciplines should not be related to the children's own experience and interests. The fact that so much so-called academic teaching of subjects does tend to neglect children's everyday knowledge ... is a condemnation of traditional pedagogy or teaching-method rather than disciplines themselves as a basis of the curriculum. (p. 85)

One wonders what a philosopher would make of the logic of culpability here? (Are the disciplines beyond logic as well as culture?)

But this is to do less than justice to Lawton or Hirst. Both have of course shown considerable sensitivity to the problems of curriculum change and implementation. I have really pursued the point to show that even more sophisticated theorists are on the horns of a dilemma when working with the prescriptive mode. Hirst (1974) has pronounced at length on the dilemma in his article "The forms of knowledge revisited":

The importance of the disciplines, in the various senses distinguished, for school education, must not be minimised. What matters in this discussion is that the logical priority of intellectual objectives be recognised even if in terms of wider human values they are sometimes judged secondary. Equally their logical structure cannot be denied if they are ever to be attained. The concerns of the universities mean that their organisation of teaching and research necessarily embody these concerns to a high degree. But schools are not universities and their teaching functions are significantly different. These need to be seen in their own right for what they are. And if once that is done then not only do the disciplines matter, but many other things matter as well, things of major psychological and social concern which must not be over-looked.

This leads to a final epilogue for the forms of knowledge as prescriptions:

Education is a complex business and philosophical analysis can contribute to our planning of it in a limited way. What it can do is alert us to the danger of too easy decisions and the issue of the place of the disciplines is more than a philosophical affair. What more there is to it, I must however leave to others. (p. 99)

The humility of this epilogue is both appealing and a clear statement of how limited the aspirations of the philosopher have become. But several logical steps
are still missing before we arrive at this denouement. It is all very well to leave it to others. But to whom? It is all very well to alert us to the danger of easy decision. But what if philosophy has led to the very dangers of prescriptive simplicities to which we have drawn attention? To go even farther back, if schools and teaching need to be seen in their own right for what they are, why does the analysis not start there? We are left again with a basic message. If curriculum theory is to be of use it must begin with studies which observe schools and teaching in their own right for what they are. Our theory must grow from a developed understanding of the curriculum which is actually produced and realized and how over time this has been reproduced. We need in short not theories of curriculum prescriptions but studies and eventually theories of curriculum as social construction.

The Devil’s Bargain: Critiques and Counters

I do not wish, however, to mount a substantial critique of CAP. That has already been attempted, in my view with conclusive success, in many other places. My intention is rather to briefly repeat that critique and then explore the new directions in which we might progress if we are to provide a valid counterculture for curriculum research.

In terms of the diagnosis of the problem they are at one with Schwab (1978). Let me briefly repeat:

The field of curriculum is moribund. It is unable, by its present methods and principles, to continue its work and contribute significantly to the advancement of education. It requires new principles which will generate a new view of the character and variety of its problems. It requires new methods appropriate to the new budget of problems. (p. 287)

Schwab was absolutely clear why the curriculum field was moribund; his indictment is plain and powerful:

The curriculum field has reached this unhappy state by inveterate, unexamined, and mistaken reliance on theory. On the one hand it has adopted theories (from outside the field of education) concerning ethics, knowledge, political and social structure, learning, mind, and personality, and has used these borrowed theories, theoretically, i.e., as principles from which to “deduce” right aims and procedures for schools and classrooms. On the other hand, it has attempted construction of educational theories, particularly theories of curriculum and instruction.

Schwab then lists the “grave difficulties” (incoherence of the curriculum, failure, and discontinuity in actual schooling) to which theoretic activities have led. This is because

theoretical constructions are, in the main, ill-fitted and inappropriate to problems of actual teaching and learning. Theory, by its very character, does not and cannot take account of all the matters which are crucial to questions to what, who, and how to teach: that is, theories cannot be applied as principles to the solution of problems concerning
what to do with or for real individuals, small groups, or real institutions located in time and space—the subjects and clients of schooling and schools. (p. 289)

Above all, then, Schwab wishes us to move away from the theoretic and embrace the practical. In terms of subject matter, he juxtaposes the two options in this way: the theoretic is always something taken to be universal or pervasive and is investigated as if it were constant from instance to instance and impervious to changing circumstance. The practical, on the other hand, is always something taken as concrete and particular and treated as infinitely susceptible to circumstance, and therefore highly liable to unexpected change: “these students, in that school, on the South side of Columbus, with Principal Jones during the present mayoralty of Ed Tweed and in view of the probability of his reelection.”

Schwab’s diagnosis should be read alongside Veblen’s and Clifford and Guthrie’s strictures about the relationships between University Schools of Education and state schooling. Veblen (1962) said “the difference between the modern university and the lower schools is broad and simple; not so much a difference of degree as of kind” (p. 15). This distinctiveness of purpose and mission

unavoidably leads them to court a specious appearance of scholarship and so to invest their technological discipline with a degree of pedantry and sophistication whereby it is hoped to give these schools and their work some scientific and scholarly prestige. (p. 23)

The resonance of Veblen’s strictures has been confirmed in Clifford and Guthrie’s recent work:

Our thesis is that schools of education, particularly those located on the campuses of prestigious research universities, have become ensnared improvidently in the academic and political cultures of their institutions and have neglected their professional allegiances. They are like marginal men, aliens in their own worlds. They have seldom succeeded in satisfying the scholarly norms of their campus letters and science colleagues, and they are simultaneously estranged from their practicing professional peers. The more forcefully they have rowed toward the shores of scholarly research, the more distant they have become from the public schools they are duty bound to serve. Conversely, systematic efforts at addressing the applied problems of public schools have placed schools of education at risk on their own campuses. (pp. 3-4)

In short, the schools of education entered into a “devil’s bargain” when they entered the university milieu. The result was their mission changed from being primarily concerned with matters central to the practice of schooling toward issues of status passage through more conventional university scholarship. As we have seen, the resulting dominance of conventional “disciplinary” modes had disastrous impact on educational theory in general and curriculum study in particular.

The devil’s bargain over education was an especially pernicious form of the displacement of discourse and debate which surrounded the evolution of univer-
sity knowledge production. University knowledge evolved as separate and distinct from public knowledge for as Mills (1979) noted:

Men of knowledge do not orient themselves exclusively toward the total society, but to special segments of that society with special demands, criteria of validity, of significant knowledge, of pertinent problems, etc. It is through integration of these demands and expectations of particular audiences which can be effectively located in the social structure, that men of knowledge organise their own work, define their data, seize upon their problems. (p. 613)

This new structural location of “men of knowledge” in the university could have profound implications for public discourse and debate. Mills (1979) believed this would happen if the knowledge produced in this way did not have public relevance, particularly if it was not related to public and practical concerns.

Only where publics and leaders are responsive and responsible are human affairs in democratic order and only when knowledge has public relevance is this possible. Only when mind has an autonomous basis, independent of power, but powerfully related to it, can it exert its force in the shaping of human affairs. Such a position is democratically possible only when there exists a free and knowledgeable public to which men of knowledge may address themselves, and to which mean of power are truly responsible. Such a public and such men—either of power or of knowledge, do not now prevail and accordingly, knowledge does not now have democratic clearance in America. (p. 613)

Of course the dilemma facing men of knowledge which Mills describes is of acute importance when that knowledge relates to schooling. For in the schools, knowledge is transmitted to future generations—hence if our knowledge of such knowledge transmission is flawed we are doubly imperilled. But schooling is so intimately related to the social order that if our knowledge of schooling is inadequate or has no public relevance, then major aspects of social and political life are obscured.

Hence the question of “whither educational or curriculum research?” is one of great importance. Mills, I think, comes close to the nature of our dilemma and spells out the implications of the devil’s bargain when he talks of the way “men of knowledge” orient themselves to “special segments of society.” This has been the fate of much educational and curriculum theory and the effect has been that, as Mills puts it, different groups “talk past each other.” With few exceptions I would argue this is precisely the relationship between curriculum scholars and school practioners: They comprise a model exercise in how to “talk past each other.” It is to the resolution of this problem that I now turn. Again partly in the spirit of Mills (1979) who once said in a letter to a “white collar wife” in a weekly mass publication journal: “It is one thing to talk about general problems on a national level and quite another to tell an individual what to do. Most “experts” dodge that question. I do not want to” (p. 3).
Recent Reactions to CAP

As a result of the perceived moribund nature of curriculum scholarship and its peculiar displaced location in university schools of education in the 1960s and 1970s, the distinction between theory and practice often led to a reaction against theory per se, not to a reformulation of theory. Theory as it had been constituted merely collided with curriculum reality. The collision left the theorists fairly overtly at a loss—"we'd better leave this to others." But the "others," who were more immersed in the reality of curriculum production and operation, drew their own conclusions about theory. If it had so little to say about the reality of practice, if in fact it grievously misrepresented or even "threatened to replace" practice, was it not best to do without theory altogether or at least leave theorizing until later?

The response in the curriculum field strongly echoes the pendulum swings in sociology at about the same time. The preeminent positivist enterprise employed a scientific hypothetico-deductive model. The aim was to discover the social laws which underpinned everyday reality. Above all they followed a model related to the philosophy of science which had as its major objective the seeking of objective facts about the social world. The scientist seeks a knowledge of the social system separate and beyond the perceptions of the people who inhabit that system, pursuing wide-ranging laws and truth.

The reaction to this pursuit of scientific and universalistic laws came from symbolic interactionists, ethnomethodologists, and sociologists of knowledge arguing for the rehabilitation of man himself and his subjective perceptions and "constructions" of reality. Drawing on Weber and Mead, we had the work of Schutz, Goffman, and Berger and Luckman. The latter were characteristic in arguing that "commonsense knowledge rather than ideas must be the central focus for the sociology of knowledge. It is precisely this knowledge that constitutes the fabric of meanings without which no society can exist" (Berger & Luckman, 1967).

The stress on subjective perceptions in sociology engendered substantial responses in the curriculum field. Here more than ever the ambivalence about theory, the manifest lack of fit with practice caused the pendulum to fly wildly to the other side when the reaction began.

In the United Kingdom, the rehabilitation of the practice and process of schooling followed similar lines echoing the new trends in sociology and certain tendencies, not only Schwabian, within American curriculum studies. A wide new range of ethnographic and interactionist studies emerged focusing on the process of schooling and most particularly on the classroom. The Manchester School, in particular Hargreaves, Lacey and Lambart, adopted an approach with antecedents in anthropology. The commitment was to trying to understand how teacher and pupils "constructed" the world of the school. Without detailed study of the school, progress was impossible. Their academic leadership often led to a
more applied approach in curriculum research and, as curriculum reforms got under way in the wake of comprehensivization, in curriculum development.

One center which took a lead in applied work was the Centre for Applied Research in Education (CARE) at the University of East Anglia. CARE was founded in 1970 and embraced commitment to the teacher and his/her perceptions and constructions. The wide range of publications produced allow us to analyze the intentions and positions of those working at CARE. While claims can be made for the uniqueness of CARE, there is much that is symptomatic and typical of beliefs at the time. By looking in some detail at CARE, it may then be possible to understand some of the reasons for the posture adopted by leading curriculum developers during this period.

In his influential book An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development, Lawrence Stenhouse (1975) stated that it is the thesis of this book that curriculum development must rest on teacher development and that it should promote it and hence the professionalism of the teacher. Curriculum development translates ideas into classroom practicalities and thereby helps the teacher to strengthen his practice by systematically and thoughtfully testing ideas. (pp. 24-25)

The stress on classroom practicalities echoes Schwab and became a strongly held value position in CARE. Working as a teacher at the time in contact with a number of CARE personnel including Stenhouse, MacDonald, and Walker, I was a beneficiary of their commitment and, quite literally, care. Walker (1974), with whom I have worked especially closely on projects and articles, and to whom my debt is substantial, put the posture with regard to curriculum studies in this way. The work, he argued, "would start with, and remain close to, the common-sense knowledge of the practitioner, and the constraints within which he works. It would aim to systematise and to build on practitioners' lore rather than supplant it" (p. 22). Barton and Lawn (1980-1981) have commented that

in separating "pure" from "applied" research, Walker feels he has successfully rid himself of a theoretical stance and, moreover, reduced the isolation of the researcher. What now counts for him is not a theoretical understanding of any particular situation but the understanding and self-recognition he can give his subjects.

On the latter point I can certainly testify, but the points on the aversion to theory are, I think, substantial and the authors go on to claim that "CARE's aversion to theory and to theorizing is consistent throughout its membership ... the question often appears to be a choice between theory and truth" (Barton & Lawn, 1980-1981, p. 4).

Of course, from the critique presented herein of curriculum theory the latter point is well taken. The danger, however, is that the reaction to prescriptive theory had led to a full flight from theory per se. There is substantial evidence of this happening at CARE.
The significance of the CARE position in articulating this strong "action" and practice position is that it was symptomatic of a major countertendency in the curriculum field at the time—spreading throughout the new "applied research" to "action-research" and pervading case study, ethnography, interactionist studies, of classrooms and evaluation. MacDonald (1976), the eminence grise of British evaluation, once broke cover to explain why his view of evaluation was thus: above all it was in reaction to controlling theories of "cost benefit" and "management by objectives": "The tendency of language like this is to suggest that the production of educated people is much like the production of anything else, a technological problem of specification and manufacture" (p. 89).

The reasons for the reaction to theory are then clear but it was, one must remember, a reaction to a particular kind of prescriptive theory suiting the ideological and economic context in which it was produced. The pendulum swing produced a full-scale flight to the arena of action, of practice, the classroom, the practitioner, the practical. We stand witness to a celebration of the practical, a revolt against the abstract. We are back with Rousseau and Emile but with the same problems if progress is ever to be pursued.

The problem of the hasty embrace of action and practice was compounded by the kind of action embraced. To the problems of the methodology of action and practical specificity must be added the problem of focus. Not surprisingly, those with a strong belief in practice and action sought ways of becoming involved. Curriculum projects offered a way into curriculum action: the ethos of CARE developed from the involvement of the key personnel in the preceding Humanities Curriculum Project. The particular view of professionalism and politics developed on HEP was later transferred over to become a total position about curriculum research in general.

In the 1960s and the early part of the 1970s a wide range of curriculum research studies and papers discussed the issue of curriculum change. It was always dealt with as synonymous with innovation. Hoyle's (1969) How Does the Curriculum Change? A Proposal for Inquiries is a good example. In addition innovation and curriculum projects were viewed as synonymous. To confirm the point, it is worth rereading Parlett and Hamilton's (1972) important paper on Evaluation as Illumination. The specificity of focus for those seeking to change the school curriculum is clear. The illuminative evaluator was characteristically concerned with "what is happening." They wanted, therefore, to study the innovatory project: how it operates, how it is influenced by the various school situations in which it is applied; what those directly concerned regard as its advantages and disadvantages and how students' intellectual tasks and academic experiences are more affected.
The illuminative evaluator, then, "aims to discover and document what it is like to be participating in the scheme, whether as a teacher of pupil; and in addition, to discern and discuss the innovation's most significant features, recurring concomitants and critical processes."

So a major milieu for those reacting to the rational/scientific school of prescriptive theorizing, given the terrain of the 1960s and 1970s curriculum field, was the innovative curriculum project. Those projects in a sense offered a perfect milieu for those with an ambivalence or antipathy to theory and a wish to be immersed in the day-to-day realities of practice and action. The problem, however, was not that it offered immersion in the milieu of action but that it was immersion in very specific milieu of action. This allowed project staff initially to have it both ways. There was no need for the generalizability of theories or programs, for the project normally centered on a limited number of chosen "pilot" schools. The need for theory could be easily and justifiably suspended.

The problems began when projects sought to generalize their work: the move, if you like, from the pilot stage toward new mainstream structures. Here, though beginning from the opposite starting point, the projects often responded with the very prescriptions and programs they had reacted against. There were prescriptions of idealized practice like the "neutral chairman"; modules and courses, like "Man a Course of Study"; and new materials and curriculum packages. The prescriptions were buttressed with more theoretical pronouncements, again with stark similarity to the prescriptive theories they had reacted against. There were now RDD models (research, development, dissemination) or KPU models (knowledge, production and utilization).

The sad truth was that, starting from utterly different points, prescriptive theory and immersion in practice led to the same collision point: everyday classroom life and existing syllabuses, exams, subject structures, subject communities, government guidelines, and new educational policies. Again the posture ended as exhortation, or "we must leave this to others."

A further paradox emerges through recent changes in education: Once again the argument against the theoretical and the sponsorship of the practical is being pursued. This time, however the vision of the practical owes little to Schwab and involves a decidedly undeliberative modality. The emergent pattern may well involve a dismantling of the ineffective existing disciplinary structure for studying education. In its place, however, will not not be a reformist embrace of the practical, but a starkly utilitarian embrace. Trainee students will now learn by "sitting with Nellie," observing and ultimately replacing for short periods established teachers who will act as their main tutors. The redundancy of existing theory will earn the ultimate reward: occupational extinction for the scholars who
practice the moribund habits. As it emerges, this prospect might prove a major spur to a paradigmatic overthrow in educational research.

**Toward a Social Constructionist Perspective: From Diagnosis to Solution**

CAP and major tendencies in the reaction to CAP share one characteristic, namely a concern to develop models of "idealized practice" (Reid, 1978, p. 17). Both models are concerned with what ought to be happening in schools, "our commitment to what should be," as Westbury (1973) argues, this can lead to "meliorism":

> A vision can so easily slide into meliorism and, unfortunately, the consequences of such a meliorist perspective have long beset our field: too often and for too much of our history we have not been able, because of our commitment to what should be, to look at what is. To look at what is betrays, our emphases suggest, too little passion, even perhaps a conservative willingness to accept schools as they are. Indeed, all too often our stances imply a condemnation of what schools do. (p. 99)

For those reacting to the often conservative prescriptions of CAP theorists, the full embrace of practice also ran the gauntlet of conservatively accepting existing practice. In doing this, the reaction to CAP threw the baby out with the bathwater. Neither model, therefore, came to terms with existing practice, with why matters work the way they do in schools.

It is thus important to restate the problems of CAP. The problem with CAP is not only that the focus is solely on prescription, but that the kind of focus is disembodied and decontextualized.

A solution would be closer if we had systematic inquiries of how curriculum prescriptions are in fact socially constructed for use in schools. Studies of the actual development of courses of study, of national curriculum plans, of subject syllabuses, and so on.

The problem as we restate it is not the fact of the focus on prescription, but the singular nature of that focus and the kind of focus. In short, what we require is a combined approach to social construction—a focus on the construction of prescriptive curricula and policy coupled with an analysis of the negotiations and realization of that prescribed curriculum. The approach is to broaden the deliberative mode with studies of practice and prescription focusing on the essentially dialectical relationship of the two.

We want, in short, "the story of action within a theory of context." This, then, is to move a step back toward the center following the moves of Schwab and some curriculum reformers to fully embrace the practical terrain. This, I have argued, was too extreme a reaction, albeit understandable at the time. Since prescription continues (and given the current centralist thrust will in fact strengthen) we need to understand social construction of curricula at the levels of prescription and process and practice. In short, the diagnosis of Schwab and some
of the curriculum reformers who saw the curriculum field as moribund is broadly accepted; their solution, however, is seen as too extreme. What is required is indeed to understand the practical but to locate this understanding within a further exploration of the contextual parameters of practice.

In curriculum study there are three levels that are amenable to social constructionist study.

1. The individual life history level.

2. The group or collective level: professions, categories, subjects, and disciplines, for instance, evolve rather as social movements over time. Likewise schools and classrooms develop patterns of stability and change.

3. The relational level: the various permutations of relations between individuals, between groups and collectivities, and between individuals, group, and collectivities; and the way these relations change over time.

Of course the relationship between individual and collective (as between action and structure) is perennially elusive. But our studies may, as has largely been the case in the past, accept or exacerbate fragmentation or alternatively, as should be our intention in the future, seek integration.

In examining individual teachers’ lives, the life history method might be usefully rehabilitated. The genesis of life histories can be located in anthropological work at the beginning of this century; the main take-up by sociologists occurred later in a series of urban and social studies at the University of Chicago.

For a number of reasons, which I have analyzed elsewhere (Goodson, 1988), this work became less and less of a priority in the Chicago studies of the city and as a result the method fell into neglect until recently. In its more contemporary usage, life history work has focused mainly on studies of deviance, crime, and urban ethnography. The methodology of life history is therefore still relatively undeveloped and its use in the study of schooling only just beginning. This omission in the study of schooling is regrettable and moving from programmatic exhortation to empirical investigation, I have in recent work employed life history data to explore the intersection between biography, history, and structure with specific regard to the secondary school curriculum (Goodson 1987, 1988).

The exhortation to reembrace life history methods was first detailed in an article in 1981 (Goodson, 1981, pp. 62-76). This was taken up in a study of teachers’ careers undertaken by Sikes, Measor and Woods (1985). They were from the beginning aware of the substantial problems and commented that “life histories do not present themselves to as a fully-fledged method ready to use. There is, as yet, no substantial body of methodological literature to support life history studies” (p. 14). Nevertheless, their work in Teacher Careers: Crises and Continuities does provide us with important insights on teachers’ lives and careers. Other work, such as Bertaux’s (1981) collection Biography and Society and Plummer’s (1983) excellent
Documents of Life, begin the rehabilitation of life history method and the exploration of the substantial methodological and ethical problems that such work entails.

Yet beyond problems intrinsic to the life history methods are problems of relationship to other levels and modes of analysis and investigation. As Mannheim (1972) warned in 1936, "Preoccupation with the purely individual life-history and its analysis is not sufficient." Above all, and rightly, I suspect, Mannheim is railing against individualism, what he calls "the fiction of the isolated and self-sufficient individual." Plainly, given the powerful legacy of individualism and of individualist assumptions present in so many epistemologies, this danger must be continually scrutinized with regard to life history work. As Mannheim (1972) says:

The genetic method of explanation, if it goes deep enough, cannot in the long run limit itself to the individual life history and the more inclusive group situation. For the individual life history is only a component in a series of mutually intertwined life histories ... it was the merit of the sociological point of view that it set alongside the individual genesis of meaning the genesis from the context of group life. (p. 165)

The relationship between individual and collective (as between action and structure) is perennially elusive. But our studies may either accept, or exacerbate, fragmentation or seek integration. Life history study pursued alongside the study of more collective groupings and milieu might promote better integration. The problem of integration is, of course, partly a problem of dealing with modes and levels of consciousness. The life history penetrates the individual subject's consciousness and attempts also to map the changes in that consciousness over the life cycle. But at the individual level, as at other levels, we must note that change is structured, but that structures change. The relationship between the individual and wider structures is central to our investigations, but again it is through historical studies that such investigations can be profitably pursued:

Our chance to understand how smaller milieux and larger structures interact, and our chance to understand the larger causes at work in these limited milieux, thus require us to deal with historical materials. (Mills, p. 165)

Ultimately, we are back with the integrative focus suggested by Wright Mills (1970) as essential for all good social science.

Social science deals with problems of biography of history and of their intersections within social structures. That these three—biography, history, society, are the coordinate points of the proper study of man has been a major platform on which I have stood when criticising several current schools of sociology whose practitioners have abandoned this classic tradition. (p. 159)

In curriculum study the relationship between the individual teacher's life and the preactive and interactive curriculum will allow insights into structure as well as action. For as Esland (1971) has argued:
Trying to focus the individual biography in its socio historical context is in a very real sense attempting to penetrate the symbolic drift of school knowledge, and the consequences for the individuals who are caught up in it and attempting to construct their reality through it. (p. 111)

What is needed is to build on studies of participants immersed in immediate process, to build on studies of historical events and periods, but to develop a cumulative understanding of the historical contexts in which the contemporary curriculum is embedded. The experience of the past decades has shown the painful limitations of ahistorical or transcendent approaches both at the level of curriculum reform and study. By developing our analysis from farther back we should be able to throw more light on the present and afford insights into the constraints immanent in transmitted circumstance.

Those studies with an action orientation have most often been confined to the view of participants at a moment in time, to the here and now of events. Their essential omission was data on the constraints beyond the event, the school, the classroom and the participant. Above all, what is needed is a method that stays with the participants, stays with the complexity of the social process, but catches some understanding of the constraints beyond. Although the human process by which men make their own history does not take place in circumstances of their own choosing as both men and women and circumstances do vary over time, so too do the potentialities for negotiating reality. Historical study seeks to understand how thought and action have developed in past social circumstances. Following this development through time to the present affords insights into how those circumstances we experience as contemporary "reality" have been negotiated, constructed, and reconstructed over time. Stenhouse saw this need for history to provide an authenticated context for hypothetical actions. His concern was also with: "what might be termed the contextual inertia within which events are embedded. It is here that history generalizes and becomes theoretical. It is, as it were, the story of action within a theory of context" (p. 7).

The historical context, of course, reflects previous patterns of conflict and power. It is not sufficient to develop a static notion of the historical contexts and constraints inherited in tacto from the past. These contexts and constraints need to be examined in relationship to contemporary action. Moreover, we need a dynamic model of how syllabuses, pedagogy, finance, resources, selection, the economy all interrelate. We cannot, in short, view the curriculum (and its associated historical contexts and constraints) as a bounded system. Williamson (1974) has reflected "that it is not sufficient to be aware only of the fact that the principles governing the selection of transmittable knowledge reflect structures of power. It is essential to move beyond such suspicions to work out the precise connections" (p. 10). This, he argues, predicates historical study of curriculum" if the
aim is to understand power in education." Above all, we need to develop cognitive maps of curriculum influence and curriculum constraints, for, as he says: "what is provided in schools and what is taught in those schools can only be understood historically. Earlier educational attitudes of dominant groups in society still carry historical weight" (pp. 10-11).

Social constructionist perspectives, therefore, seek a reintegrated focus for studies of curriculum: moving away from singular foci whether on idealized practice or actual practice toward developing data on social construction at both preactive and interactive levels. At this point, as I have argued elsewhere, the most significant lacuna for such a reconceptualized program of study are historical studies of the social construction of school curricula. We really know very little about how the subjects and themes prescribed in schools originate, are promoted and redefined, and metamorphose.

Hence work on the history of the social construction of school curricula is a vital prerequisite for reconceptualized curriculum study. Fortunately, however, a good deal of work has been undertaken in the last decade which is coming to fruition. The series Studies in Curriculum History (Goodson) now comprises 12 volumes which provide a wide range of different studies of the social construction of school curricula. New studies are now being commissioned for this series and in time we hope to have a fairly comprehensive set of studies of the origins and promotion of curricula in a range of settings and at a range of levels. Other work, especially in North America, complements this initiative and develops our understanding of the contestation which has surrounded the development of prescriptive curricula (Kliebard, 1975).

To begin any analysis of schooling by accepting without question a form and content of curriculum that was fought for and achieved at a particular historical point on the basis of certain social and political priorities, to that curriculum as a given, is to forgo a whole range of understandings and insights into features of the control and operation of the school and the classroom. It is to take over the mystifications of previous episodes of governance as unchallengeable givens. We are, let us be clear, talking about the systematic "invention of tradition" in an arena of social production and reproduction, the school curriculum, where political and social priorities are paramount. Histories of other aspects of social life have begun to systematically scrutinize this process. Hobsbawn (Hobsbawn & Ranger, 1985) argues that the term "invented tradition": "includes both traditions actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less traceable manner within a brief and dateable period—a matter of a few years perhaps—and establishing themselves with great rapidity." Hobsbawn defines the matter this way:
Invented tradition is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature which seek to circulate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past. (p. 1)

In this sense the making of curriculum can be seen as a process of inventing tradition. In fact this language is often used when the "traditional disciplines" or "traditional subjects" are juxtaposed against some newfangled innovation of integrated or child-centered topics. The point, however, is that the written curriculum is a supreme example of the invention of tradition: but, as with all tradition, it is not a once-and-for-all given; it is a given which has to be defended, where the mystifications have to be constructed and reconstructed over time. Plainly, if curriculum theorists substantially ignore the history and social construction of curriculum, such mystification and reproduction of "traditional" curriculum form and content becomes easier.

An important stage, then, in the development of a social constructionist perspective is the production of a wide series of studies on the social construction of the prescriptive curriculum. But this is only a part of the story as the advocates of "practice" have long and correctly maintained. For what is prescribed is not necessarily what is undertaken, and what is planned is not necessarily what happens. But, as I have argued, this should not imply that we abandon our studies of prescription as social construction and embrace, in singular form, the practical. We should instead seek to study the social construction of curriculum as both the levels of prescription and interaction.

The challenge is to develop new substantive and methodological foci which integrate studies at the proactive and the interactive levels. The linkage and integration of these studies is the major problem, for we are dealing with different levels and arenas of social construction. This difference of levels and arenas has often led to the argument that there is a complete break between proactive and interactive and that the latter is, to all intents and purposes, autonomous. This, of course, leads us back to the argument that "practice is all that matters" and hence that we should focus our studies solely on practice.

The focus of recent curriculum study on projects and innovation (noted earlier) is partly responsible for this belief in autonony. Two quotes from *Inside a Curriculum Project* illustrate this tendency: "the project team had to explain what it was going to do before it could do it. The teachers started by doing it and only then looked for an explanation of why they were doing it that way" (p. 2). But what was the "it" the teachers were doing and how and where was it socially constructed? Likewise, "the end product of the project was determined in the field, in contract with the school, not on the drawing board ... in the end it was
what worked that survived” (p. 2). Both these quotes celebrate the autonomy of the school and of practice. But both of them are likely to lead to our missing the point. For only what is prepared on the drawing board goes into the school and therefore has a chance to be interpreted and to survive. Of course, if this is so for the notoriously unloved curriculum project, it is even more the case for the traditional (and less scrutinized and contested) school subject. With the latter, clear parameters to practice are socially constructed at the preactive level.

And if the questions of the form and scale of “parameters” remain elusive, it is above all for this reason that we need to link our work on social construction at the preactive and interactive levels. At one level this will mean urging closer connection between studies of school process and practice as currently constituted and studies of social construction at the preactive level. A culminating stage in developing a social constructionist perspective would be to develop studies which themselves integrate studies of social construction at both preactive and interactive levels. We shall need to explore and develop integrative foci for social constructionist study, and in this respect exploring the relational level would provide a strategy for strengthening and bringing together studies of action and of context in meaningful ways. Above all social constructionist perspectives would improve our understanding of the politics of curriculum and in doing so would provide valuable “cognitive maps” for teachers seeking to understand and locate the parameters to their practice.

References


