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The school Curriculum as Viewed by the Critical Theorists

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Abstract

The school curriculum and its related issues have turned out to be the subject of debate among educationalists in the recent years; the new social, cultural, political, and economic developments have shaped a new understanding of the school curriculum and affected the educational practices all over the world. These developments have posed new challenges to the educationalists as a number of new theorists have emerged, in Germany and the USA, who questioned the value of established social and educational principles—including the school curriculum—by the application of the critical pedagogy. The present descriptive-analytical study aimed at defining the basic features of the school curriculum on the basis of the new critical approaches. The data were collected through library research method.

Keywords: Curriculum, Critical Pedagogy, Critical Theorists, The Hidden Curriculum;

1. Introduction

The school curriculum in any given country is reflective of the objectives and the educational philosophies that govern the run of the daily life. These very philosophies are affected by the sociopolitical changes in both local and social contexts. The educationalists are, therefore, are constantly involved in the process of decision making on the school curriculum.

The recent developments in the European countries have had an impact on the educational requirements of the other countries. The educational systems of many countries all around the world have tried to modify and adopt these developments in their school curriculum through the application of a critical outlook according to the dominant educational philosophies of each particular region. The emergence of the new critical approaches in the Western

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countries has led to the modification of different core concepts such as teachers’ role, the school curriculum and even the educational philosophies.

The present paper aims at studying the school curriculum in the light of these new critical views. The first section introduces the conceptual modifications of the school curriculum, the second section deals with the critical pedagogy, the third section reviews the views expressed by the critical theories and finally the final section provides an analysis of these views. The findings of this study can be applied to the devising of new school curriculums and revision of the existing curriculum Development design.

2. The Conceptual Changes of the School Curriculum

The concept of the school curriculum had been subject to interpretation as an integrated component of every educational philosophy throughout history. The school curriculum covers a wide range of controversial issues in the modern time. “Curriculum”, being of Latin origin, means different way of achieving ones’ objectives (Maleki, 1384). The educationalists approached the school curriculum from different angles in the course of history. While its main framework of consisted of the lesson plans and the school subjects up to early 20th century, the introduction of the new issues such as the learners’ function in the learning process and the on-going social developments have given a new socio-political dimension to the school curriculum as an educational concept (Fatheivajargha, 1386). The theorists such as Freire, McLaren, Giroux, and Apple have introduced a new set of concepts known as the critical pedagogy to analyse the school curriculum in the light of new developments in the educational philosophies. Giroux and Apple stated that the reference to the hidden curriculum has been an attempt to gain dominance over the rival groups in the educational settings.

3. The Critical Pedagogy

The critical pedagogy emerged as the result of the educational reforms advocated by the Frankfurt School in Germany and was later developed by educationalists such as Freire, Giroux, McLaren, Apple, and Douglas Kelenner in order to provide a critical re-assessment of the issues involved in the modern education (Dinarvand and Emani, 1387). The critical approach, being the application of the concepts brought forward by the Frankfurt School of thought, is also known as critical education (ibid. p.152). Freire is regarded as a major critical theorist in the critical pedagogy (Miller, trans. Mehrmohammadi, 1379, p.97); he has stated in his book entitled “The Education of the Oppressed” that inequity in education has violated the rights of less privileged members of communities and ends up in denying the basic human rights in modern societies. He also said that the critical education would a reaction to this institutionalized inequity as critical pedagogy had shed light on the educational inequity and questioned the myth of equal opportunity, abilities, internalization of the concepts as well as the personal derives in education. The critical theorists hold that the learners need to form an awareness of the various levels of inequity while being able to face the opposite voices. In other words the learners have to embrace multiplicity of the voices, multiculturalism, ethnicity and the clash of interests in the educational settings (Johnson and Morrison, 2010). The learners must show a high degree of tolerance and readiness in facing other voices while socializing within different communities.

4. The School Curriculum and the Critical Theorists

The critical theorists have discussed the concept of school curriculum in some details, as it had been a major subject of debate among the educationalists. This section provides a review of the views expressed by the critical theorists who can be later applied as guidelines in planning school activities. Henry Giroux states that the contemporary education which is designed on the basis of the modernist philosophies, including Taylor’s logic, many drawbacks and needs to be modified to bring philosophies of the postmodernism, critical approaches, feminism, and new concepts of school curriculum tighter. He refers to the political nature of
education in the schools and adds that they must be the springboard of democracy in modern societies saying that the schools must train our future citizens as individuals who think critically in the context of democratic societies. McLaren says that schools should generate the critical knowledge that enables students to become an active member of community socio-politically. He further adds that only those institutions could be regarded as “School” where the learners become critical thinkers who are willing to bring about social changes. These schools provide the learners with the required social skills and turn them into hopeful and active members of community (Marjani, 1385, p.80). Apple believes that schools are merely places to keep students occupied for a while, whereas they need to be places for studying social issues critically. The schools need to be flexible and must not ignore the importance of the social changes (Apple, 1979).

The critical theorists unlike the idealist or realist educationalists do not consider the questions of school objectives, curriculum design, authority and control in school as abstract metaphysical issues. To them every educational activity is an endeavor to gain control over the rival groups. Those in the position of power impose their knowledge, education, curriculum, and teaching practices upon their rival groups. The school curriculum and subjects are in fact the text documents that legitimize the authority of the ruling bodies. The dominant forces in the educational settings are teachers, curriculum designers, and some student groups; teachers will not be the sole authority in the classroom as the teaching practices become more student-centred. The student-centred classroom facilitates learning through social interaction, criticism, and research, problem-solving, and hands-on experience. Giroux says that students need to gain an awareness of the cultural diversity to benefit from the multiplicity of the voices. These students must participate in class discussions on the moral and political issues.

5. The Critical Pedagogy and the School Curriculum

The critical pedagogy as conceived by the critical theorists considers the following characteristics for the school curriculum:

5.1. The school curriculum and social changes
Kardoz (2009) quotes Giroux when saying that teachers must be not only voices of opposition in schools but also in the communities. He believes that theories that do not regard schools as places for social changes and the interaction between different groups and individual who have their vested interests must be discarded.

5.2. The Social and Political Participants
The school curriculum must enable students to become socio-politically active members of the community. The students must stand for what is right and resist the oppressors. There are subjects such as sociology, social sciences, and history that must be the platform of free discussion and sharing views. These discussions need to be unbiased to become the training ground for the social and political leaders and social activists.

5.3. Multicultural Curriculum
The concept of multiculturalism states that students from different racial and cultural backgrounds must interact with each other to learn how to think critically over the cultural issues. The multicultural curriculum includes religious education as familiarity with religious issues provides the students with a chance to be innovative critical thinkers. The critical theory advocates a school curriculum that leads to changes in school and society. The revision of school subjects through the application of critical thinking to the cultural issues must aim at achieving multi-literacy in these institutions. The multiculturalism opens the path of democracy in the schools. Giroux says that the best teaching practice is critical dialogue that facilitates the students’ interaction with others without any obligation or threat. Teaching is in fact the application of critical thinking in the process of problem solving (Fatheivajargha 1386). The students must stand against inequity while listening to the voices of opposition; it is to say that students need to embrace multiplicity of voices, multiracialism, multi-nationals and multiculturalism (Johnson and Morrison, 2010).
6. Curriculums and the Critical Theory

The critical theory holds that teachers live within the framework of social, political and cultural relationships. This framework reflects certain degree of variety; therefore, the school curriculum should be designed on the basis of diversity. The followings are the main components of the school curriculum according to the critical theory (Goutek, trans. Pakseresht, 1388, p. 481):

- The formal curriculum- consisting of the common skills and usual subjects
- The hidden curriculum- consisting of the values, views, and behaviours

The formal curriculum, which safeguards the current run of affairs, consists of the usual school subjects such as literature, Geography, and social sciences. It advocates the existing power structure and provides students with the knowledge that is a social construct.

The hidden curriculum emphasizes competition, consumerism, and private ownership to sustain the current socio-economic conditions. The following section reviews what the critical theorists have said on the concept of the hidden curriculum.

Philip Jackson first used the term “The Hidden Curriculum” in his book entitled “Living in the Classroom” (1986) as he introduced education as the process of becoming a social being (Wikipedia, 2007). The following factors form the hidden curriculum:

- School Rules and Regulations
- Personal Interactions
- Teachers and Student Relations
- Teaching Practices and the hidden curriculum relationship

The hidden curriculum consists of the messages that teachers, books, educational resources, and even school administration convey to the students. These messages conveyed by the teachers who have no awareness of their function (Aziner, trans. Mehrmohammadi, 1387, p.131). Apple has stated that hidden curriculum includes a set of rules and subjects that construct power relationship and institutionalize them among students (Apple, 1979). McLaren defines hidden curriculum as the implied teaching of the values and behavioural patterns in the context of informal education. He further adds that the hidden curriculum forces the students to accept the existing power relationships as well as the dominant ideology and norms in the name of moral behaviour.

The critical theorists believe that the hidden curriculum serves the authorities as it puts schools at the service of power structure without having an awareness of their true function (Mehrmohammadi and etal, 1387). The hidden curriculum establishes a set of values and norms that are in line with dominant ruling class as it resists all the possible challenges (Fatheivajargha, 1386). The hidden curriculum is an integrated component of the modern educational planning (Aziner, trans. Mehrmohammadi, 1387). This school curriculum sustains the existing racial, social and sexual categorization intact by turning them into established norms (Fatheivajargha, 1386, p. 48). Modern schools are components of a social process and their performance must be judged within a definite socio-economic framework. Therefore, the school curriculum must be studied as a cultural component. The critical theory holds that the relationship between the school curriculum and the community must be reviewed to make a distinction between the formal and hidden curriculums, which leads to a better understanding of the dominant value system. It is also a matter of common consensus that teaching practices are subject to interpretation and convey different sets of meanings, values, cultural norms, and social practices (Giroux, 1979).

The school curriculum must not be the source of negative reaction and resistance against the social changes as teachers are to function as the pioneers of change (Goutek, trans. Pakseresht, 1388, p. 480). The school curriculum must include all the cultural values that exist in a modern social institute (Fatheivajargha, 1388. p. 74).

The educationalists need to consider the function of hidden curriculum as a component of social inequity as in most cases the formal curriculum is nothing but its confirmation. The critical theorists answer the question posed by Giroux on the processes that recreate the dominant power structure and safeguard inequity within the communities. A number of the critical theorists have focused on cultural concerns by regarding the economic relationships as less important. Yong and Cady believe that schools reflect the value system of the ruling bodies; whereas others believe that students are resistance forces at schools.
Giroux says that the hidden curriculum can be studied through the social processes that are reflected in students’ classroom interactions (McLaren, 1998). Students resist against school norms but it must not be taken as an act of open rebellion. Some of the students who have gained an understanding of the school curriculum decide not to react in any manner; the critical theorists believe that these students need to be pinpointed. The idea of resistance has been studied from a masculine perspective; therefore, the feminist experience is to be reviewed by feminist critics. The hidden curriculum is in line with the norms and sexual values, which form the acceptable values of the majority, although there is, always an air of equity in the educational settings. The school curriculum recreates the values of a patriarchal society.

7. Conclusion
The critical theorists believe that the school curriculum must be inclusive of individual differences such as racial backgrounds and social objectives. This new approach to school curriculum has changed the function of teachers and students in modern schools by enabling students to think critically. There is a need to review the existing educational philosophies that are reflected in the school curriculum. These changes will be best show up in the social goals and objectives of the community.

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