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Analysis of Strategies for Teachers to Respond to School-Based Curriculum Development

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Abstract: *School-based curriculum development incorporates teachers into the process of curriculum development, meaning that teachers are given a degree of professional autonomy to develop a curriculum that is better suited to the needs of the school and its students. The local, contemporary, and personalized approach to school-based curriculum development will make it richer, but there is also the problem of teachers being ill-prepared to participate in curriculum development. It is worth exploring how teachers can move from the traditional focus on "how to teach" to a balance between "what to teach" and "how to teach". This means that teachers should change roles from being passive implementers of the curriculum to being developers and researchers of the curriculum. School-based curriculum development requires teachers to deepen their understanding of the content of the curriculum, become familiar with the basic models of current curriculum development, and make good use of critical thinking.*

Keywords: *school-based curriculum development; teachers; critical thinking*

1. Introduction

School-based curriculum development is a new strategy for curriculum development as opposed to national curriculum development. Whereas the dominant national curriculum development has been a top-down, state-led curriculum development strategy, school-based curriculum development emphasizes a bottom-up, school community-led curriculum development strategy. In other words, school-based curriculum development devolves the power of curriculum development to schools and teachers so that they are formally involved in the development of the curriculum. On the one hand, schools and teachers have a certain degree of autonomy in the curriculum development process, which allows them to better adapt to the school's positioning and development goals. On the other hand, curriculum development is new to many front-line teachers and the shift from the traditional focus on "how to teach" to choosing and deciding "what to teach" will be a challenge in teachers' professional development.

Teachers are one of the main roles in school-based curriculum development, and it is natural that a key to the successful implementation of school-based curriculum development is how teachers can be better and more effectively involved in school-based curriculum development. Given the relatively late start of school-based curriculum development theory and practice in China, this paper intends to explore the following three aspects of how to promote the improvement of teachers' capacity in school-based curriculum development.

2. Deepening the understanding of the content of the curriculum

For a long time since the founding of our country, the pedagogy used in China was the Pedagogy of the Soviet pedagogue Kairov, which was a pedagogy with teaching plans, syllabuses, and textbooks but no curriculum. This inevitably leads our teachers to look at this later concept of curriculum with more or less bias and deficiency. For example, the curriculum simplified as teaching material is one of the most prominent manifestations, and school-based curriculum development is reflected in the tendency to reduce school-based curriculum development to self-published teaching materials, thus ignoring the process of school-based curriculum development. This shows that a deeper understanding of the connotations of curriculum is the basis for school-based curriculum development.

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From an etymological point of view, both “curriculum” (homework and its process), which appears frequently in Zhu Xi’s Zhu Zi Quan Shu - On Learning, and “currere” (the process and experience of running), which is the Latin etymology of the word curriculum in Western English, reflect the unity of content and process and are closer to what we use it today.

There are a variety of definitions of curriculum, but they can be broadly grouped into the following three: curriculum as discipline, curriculum as program or goal, and curriculum as learners’ experiences. Firstly, the most common and widespread definition of curriculum should be curriculum as discipline. For example, Ci Hai, an unabridged and comprehensive Chinese dictionary, defines curriculum as: “Broadly speaking, it refers to the scope, structure, and arrangement of the process of educational content determined to achieve the training objectives of all levels and types of schools; narrowly speaking, it refers to a subject set out in a teaching program. That is, a ‘subject of instruction’.” [1] This definition can be reflected in school-based curriculum development as a concept of curriculum development permeating the development of elective courses, activity courses, etc. in order to offer, teach, and learn these courses well. While this is a generally accepted definition of curriculum, its problems cannot be ignored in this regard, namely that it cuts off curriculum content and curriculum process, thus favoring content. Moreover, the perception of curriculum as discipline can force a false perception of the curriculum as static and unchanging rather than dynamic and evolving, thus neglecting students’ experiences and learning in the curriculum. Second, the curriculum is plan or goal. This definition sees the curriculum as the pre-planning of the teaching and learning process or the goals to be achieved in the teaching and learning process, referring to the process nature of the curriculum, thus repairing to some extent the shortcomings of the first definition. This definition of school-based curriculum development is reflected in the need to focus on the plans or objectives of school-based curriculum development and to avoid the tendency to stray from the process of curriculum implementation, as in the case of elective and activity-based courses, which are optional for the sake of being optional and activity for the sake of being activity-based. However, this definition's emphasis on curriculum plans and objectives still somewhat neglects the curriculum process and fails to reflect the learners’ experiences. Finally, the curriculum is the experiences of the learners. This definition sees the curriculum as the experiences of the learners under the guidance of the teacher, as well as the experiences of the learners spontaneously. It can be reflected in school-based curriculum development as school-based curriculum development should take into account the interests and needs of students. Viewing the curriculum as learners’ experiences removes the dichotomy between content and process, but at the same time, there is a suspicion that systematic knowledge transfer is neglected.

Having analyzed the three main definitions of curriculum, we should also understand the trends in the connotation of curriculum. Since the 1970s, the development of the connotation of curriculum has shown the following six major trends: from an emphasis on subject content to an emphasis on learners’ experiences; from an emphasis on goals and plans to an emphasis on the value of the process itself; from an emphasis on the single factor of teaching materials to an emphasis on the integration of the four factors of teachers, students, teaching materials and the environment; from an emphasis on explicit curriculum only to an emphasis on both explicit and implicit curriculum; from emphasizing the “actual curriculum” to emphasizing both the “actual curriculum” and the “empty curriculum”; from emphasizing only the school curriculum to emphasizing the integration of the school curriculum and the out-of-school curriculum. [2]These changes in the connotations of the curriculum have also, to some extent, prompted participants in school-based curriculum development to make corresponding adjustments and changes.

3. Familiarity with the basic models of curriculum development

For a long time, China has been adopting the strategy of national curriculum development, i.e. research-development-promotion. Under this strategy, teachers are the passive recipients and faithful implementers of the curriculum, and what they need to think about is mainly “how to teach”. The image of the teacher is too homogeneous. With the introduction of the concept of school-based curriculum development, teachers’ traditional mode of education and teaching was broken and they had to deal with the challenges that came with it, such as how to move from being passive recipients of the curriculum to being active creators of the curriculum, how to break away from the simple ‘how to teach’ to a balance of ‘what to teach’ and ‘how to teach’. These questions challenge teachers’ curriculum development skills, which means that to participate in school-based curriculum development teachers should improve their own skills in curriculum development, which is the cornerstone of school-based curriculum development.

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Understanding and becoming familiar with the main current models of curriculum development is an effective way of addressing the lack of capacity of front-line teachers to conduct school-based curriculum development. Our current major models of curriculum development include Taylor's Goal Model, Stenhouse's Process Model, and Skilbeck's Contextual Model, in addition to variations of these major models.

The goal model is a system of procedures and strategies that curriculum developers use as a starting point for identifying educational goals and then developing the curriculum. In his book Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction, Taylor discusses four fundamental questions that must be answered for curriculum development: what educational purposes should the school seek to attain; what educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes; how can these educational experiences be effectively organized; and how can we determine whether these purposes are being attained. [3]In short, Taylor's goal model identifies four steps in curriculum development: identifying goals, selecting experiences, organizing implementation, and evaluating results. In defining educational goals, Taylor advocates on the one hand seeking internally from the learners themselves, but also believes that goals should be selected from outside the school (contemporary life outside the school, advice from subject experts) and from other disciplines (philosophy, psychology). Subsequently, curriculum developers should select learning experiences, organize them and evaluate them in turn, in accordance with the educational objectives. In general terms, Taylor's goal model starts with the identification of the curriculum objectives and the whole process unfolds in a linear form and emphasizes the cause-and-effect relationship throughout the development of the curriculum. However, due to the complexity of the educational process, the goal model, based on the philosophy of scientific positivism and behaviorist psychology, has its inherent flaws, such as neglecting the holistic nature of the curriculum structure and placing one-sided emphasis on the specificity of the goals; emphasizing that education is a science rather than an art and severing the facts and values of the educational process. These are some of the things that teachers should be aware of when using the goal-based model for school-based curriculum development.

The process model was created in response to the problems inherent in the goal model. According to Stenhouse, there are two major obstacles to applying the goal model to curriculum development in general: first, the goal model misunderstands the nature of knowledge; and second, the goal model misunderstands the nature of the processes that improve curriculum practice. [4]Accordingly, Stenhouse proposes that curriculum development is the selection of activities that create a curriculum of knowledge in the form of processes, concepts, and standards about a subject and provide "process principles" for implementation. The process model does not emphasize pre-determined goals but rather specifies the content and principles of the educational process, i.e. the process model focuses on the fact that the content to be learned, the methods to be adopted and the standards to be followed in the activities should be specified in curriculum development, while the outcomes to be achieved by the students do not need to be formulated in advance, but rather evaluated afterwards using criteria that are based on that form of knowledge. Stenhouse argues that a tabular list of behavioral goals, as in the goal model, does not help one to find the means to achieve them, and that only an analysis of the criteria for worthwhile activities can help us to move closer to the "process principle" of teaching, which essentially means encouraging teachers to reflect on and create curriculum practices. The process model is about developing student agency and creativity, encouraging students to explore areas of knowledge that are of educational value and thus to engage in free and autonomous activities. In line with the claims of the process model, participants in school-based curriculum development can align the development of students' subjectivity with educational activities and processes in order to achieve the pursuit of knowledge and the intrinsic value of education itself. Finally, the contextual model of curriculum development can be said to have a natural connection to school-based curriculum development. The model emphasizes that curriculum development should focus on the different specific realities of different schools, allowing schools to develop their own curriculum according to their own realities, reflecting the spiritual orientation of curriculum development to be adapted to the local context, to the time, and to the person. Skilbeck divides the contextual model into five stages: analysis of the context, formation of objectives, design of the program, interpretation, and implementation, and checking, evaluation, feedback, and reconstruction. [5] Mastering such a highly operational and adaptable model of curriculum development will provide a great deal of convenience and effective implementation procedures for teachers involved in school-based curriculum development.

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4. Making good use of critical thinking

School-based curriculum development gives teachers the autonomy to decide "what to teach", giving them the dual role of curriculum developer and curriculum implementer. The most straightforward way of deciding what to teach is to draw on local materials or to adapt to local, seasonal, and personal circumstances. However, choosing what to teach is also a challenge for teachers. For example, a primary school student has recently pointed out that in the textbook Yi Shoots the Ninth Sun, since the preceding paragraph mentions that "the water in the rivers was steamed dry", how can the following paragraph say "he waded through ninety-nine great rivers and came to the East Sea." [6] Such a "soul-torturing question" is enough to make the experts who compile textbooks uneasy.

To reduce or avoid such logical fallacies, teachers involved in school-based curriculum development should arm themselves with critical thinking. The Chinese term is a literal translation from the English word critical thinking, where the word critical is derived from the noun critic, which refers to a critic. And based on the characteristics of a critic, the word critical means not to be blindly gullible about anything, but to maintain a cautious attitude, that is, if you translate critical thinking in a paraphrased way, then "careful thinking" or "rigorous thinking" will seem to better reflect the original meaning of critical thinking. One of the key questions in critical thinking is what judgment you make when you see or hear a claim, and how you determine whether the claim is credible. Contrary to our traditional beliefs, critical thinking emphasizes the need to question whether it is fiction or non-fiction, whether it is fact or imagination, and whether it is fact or opinion. This leads teachers involved in school-based curriculum development to constantly interrogate the educational content when choosing what to teach, and to use evidence and logic to determine the credibility of the content they choose. In terms of distinguishing the reliability of information, a group of librarians at California State University, Chico (USA) have proposed a criterion to help researchers select research materials - CRAAP. [7] C refers to currency, which means that when you see a piece of information, you first look at when it was published, whether it is out of date, and whether it is now available. The second letter, R, is an abbreviation for relevance, which means that when you see a piece of information you have to think: what is the relevance of this piece of information to you? Is it relevant or irrelevant to the topic you are interested in? To whom is it addressed and is it aimed at you? Is it a popular science article or an academic article? It may be written differently for a different audience and may have a different rigor. The third is A, which stands for authority. After seeing this information, you should think: who is the author of this article, what kind of institution does he work in, is he qualified to write such an article, what is his background, is it a book or a peer-reviewed academic article. It is very important to analyze the authority of the article and the credibility and reliability of the author. The fourth A is an abbreviation for accuracy, which mainly guides the degree of accuracy of the information. It would be a guide to where exactly this information came from, whether there is literature, and if there is cited literature, it would indicate that this information might be more accurate. The last P is an abbreviation for purpose. We need to know what the purpose of writing and disseminating this information is, whether it is for advertising, academic research, or just to express one's own viewpoint. If teachers involved in school-based curriculum development can follow this step-by-step process when choosing what to teach, they will undoubtedly be better able to identify and organize the educational content they choose.

In addition to the above three points, teachers should also be involved in school-based curriculum development by upholding modern educational concepts, enriching their knowledge base, strengthening their psychological qualities, developing a spirit of participation and cooperation, and having the ability to conduct action research, etc. And by continuously improving their concepts, qualities, and abilities in all aspects, front-line teachers can better meet the challenges of school-based curriculum development.

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