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Planning to Teach: Interrogating the Link among the Curricula, the Syllabi, Schemes and Lesson Plans in the Teaching Process

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Abstract
This paper was triggered by the confusion in learning institutions where most teachers and their students cannot distinguish between curriculum and syllabus. In a preliminary informal discussion with seven seasoned teachers and five pre-service student teachers at one of the secondary schools in Masvingo Rural the writers established that most teachers could not distinguish between the terms curriculum and syllabus. Yet they have passed through teachers training programme at college or university. The paper is based on the philosophy that teaching and learning are highly complex and pervasive phenomena, and therefore in a formal setting they have to be well structured for efficiency and effectiveness. A successful formal teaching and learning process, thus, requires proper selection and arrangement of the teaching items or materials. Selection and sequencing of learning content and methodologies thereof take place in the curriculum, syllabus, scheme of work and lesson plan stages. Thus, this paper argues that the distinction between these educational terms is largely on the degree of generalness, specificity and the stage at which it occurs.
Keywords: Curriculum, syllabus, scheme of work, lesson plan, teaching and learning, students, school.

1. Introduction

Teaching and learning are highly complex and pervasive phenomena, and therefore in a formal setting they have to be well structured for efficiency and effectiveness. A successful formal teaching and learning process requires proper selection and arrangement of the teaching items or materials. The selection and the sequencing of learning content and methodologies thereof take place in the curriculum, syllabus, scheme of work and lesson plan stages. Thus, the distinction among these educational terms is largely on the degree of generalness, specificity and the stage at which it occurs. In this paper we distinguish between the curriculum, the syllabus, the schemes of work and the lesson plan at secondary school level using Zimbabwe as case study. We argue that curriculum, syllabus, schemes of work and lesson plans are important factors at any school. Nevertheless, the difference among them is not usually clear to a significant number of teachers. For effective communication, we, thus, use these subtopics to simplify both the concepts and the discourse in this paper.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

From a preliminary informal talk with seven seasoned and five pre-service teachers at one of the secondary schools in Masvingo rural areas, the writers established that most teachers could not distinguish between the terms curriculum and syllabus. This is made worse by exposure to classic and traditional American scholarship in which the distinction between curriculum and syllabus is blurred. Reading through the works of Smith, *et al* (1957); Good (1959); Taba (1962); Foshay (1969); Tanner and Tanner (1975); and Connelly and Clandinin, (1988), one gets the impression that curriculum is synonym to syllabus. Yet, in Zimbabwe, as in the United Kingdom, curriculum and syllabus are two different though related concepts. School teachers who passed through teachers training programme at college or university in Zimbabwe are expected to be fully aware of this distinction. Failure to spell out the distinction between these concepts means that most student teachers leave their colleges without a clear understanding of the distinction between curriculum and syllabus. If this is the case, then there is a misnomer somewhere. Teachers are the key to effective learning. Yet, this failure to distinguish between curriculum and syllabus shows that they are inadequately prepared, trained, supervised and supported in their work. Therefore, this paper not only seeks to differentiate curriculum from syllabus, but goes further to complete the cycle by adding schemes of work and lesson plans to the exposition. The intention is to make sure that the teacher has a clear picture of what happens at all these procedural and sequential stages in the preparation of teaching.

1.2. Statement of Contribution

The overall aim of this paper is to contribute a theoretical framework that will help towards the preparation of teaching at secondary school in Zimbabwe. The paper aims at enlarging considerably the knowledge base and understanding of the concepts of curriculum, syllabus, scheme of work and lesson plan.

1.3. Methodology

This paper was triggered by field observation or experience in the classroom situation as outlined in the statement of the problem. The paper is thus based on what the researchers experienced or observed as background to the study (laying the foundation for the study), desktop research, theoretical literature review and content analysis. Thus, the preliminary stages of the paper can be viewed as empirical experience or observation of what actually is happening on the ground. The second phase in the development of this paper was then desktop analysis and literature review. Finally, the third and final phase was the writing of the paper.

1.4. Theoretical Framework

This paper is guided by the curriculum theory. Curriculum theory sees learning as planned and guided. The argument is that for learning to occur, the process has to specify in advance what it seeks to achieve and the process thereof. This fits well with both the title and content of this paper. The paper argues that the relationship among the curriculum, the syllabus, the schemes of work and the lesson plan is well explained in a stages or process format in which one comes after another in a formal school setup. In fact the contemporary curriculum theory and practice emerged within the formal school setup (Smith, 2000).

2. Curriculum

The word, 'curriculum' is derived from the Latin word "*Currere.*" *Currere* means to run / to proceed. The word refers to the 'course of deeds and experiences through which children grow to become mature adults'(Hlebowitsh, 2004). Curriculum is thus, a well-defined and prescribed course of studies which students must complete for them to pass a given level of education. It is a predetermined subject matter in a planned sequence of experiences leading to certifiable completion. Curriculum is the base for the learning outcomes and activities through which the teaching and learning process moves in advance.

The classical American understanding of curriculum makes no clear distinction between curriculum and syllabus. Following are some sample definitions of curriculum from famous classical American scholars. Smith, et al (1957) define a curriculum as a sequence of potential experiences set up in the school for the purpose of disciplining children and youth in group ways of thinking and acting. Good (1959) defines it as an over-all plan of the content that the school offers the student by way of qualifying him / her for graduation or certification or for entrance into a professional or vocational field. For Taba (1962) a curriculum is simply a plan for learning. Foshay (1969) regards it as all the experiences a learner has under the guidance of the school.

In fact, the European term syllabus and the classical North American term curriculum seem to be sometimes further apart, depending on the context in which they are used. According to Allen (1994), in Britain, the term syllabus refers to the content or subject matter of an individual subject, whereas the term curriculum stands for the totality of content to be taught and aims to be realized within one school or educational system. In the classical American scholarship, curriculum tends to be synonymous with syllabus in the British sense (Allen, 1994).

Wisegeek.com (accessed on 14 October 2014) sees curricula as guidelines prepared for educators prescribing what they need to teach students in the education systems. Curricula thus, not only give outlines of the subjects that need to be taught, but they also give teaching and learning methods to ensure that students have indeed learned the necessary materials. It is, therefore, the full set of taught content and teaching methods in a school system. For Hlebowitsh (2004), curricula are sets of courses, inclusive of their content, offered at a school or university. Dictionary.com (accessed on 14 October 2014) defines curriculum as the sum total of courses of study given in schools, colleges, universities; regular or particular courses of studies in schools, colleges, and so on.

According to Khwaja, et al (2014), in general terms, the term curriculum refers to the contract between society, the state and educational professionals with regard to the educational activities that learners should undergo during a certain phase of their lives to learn something desirable. It is the formal and informal content and process by which learners gain knowledge and understanding, develop skills, and alter attitudes, appreciations, and values under the auspices of an academic institution. Curriculum is thus the total experience of the learner as illustrated by Van den Akker (2003); see Figure 1 below. Curriculum is thus, not only the content selected and delivered, but also the planned and unplanned activities in which individuals' participate as students (Khwaja, et al, 2014).

As already alluded to above with regard to the distinction between curriculum and syllabus, the term curriculum is sometimes used interchangeably with other related terms like syllabus and course. As observed by Khwaja, et al (2014), curriculum can refer to any level of an educational experience, from that of a particular area within a course, to the course itself, to a broader programme of study that comprises a number of different courses around a particular content area. It is generally used to refer to a focus of study, consisting of various courses all designed to reach a particular proficiency or qualification; whereas syllabus refers to the content or subject matter, instructional strategies and evaluation means of an individual course. The collective syllabus of a

programme of study represents a map of the curriculum for that programme (Khwaja, et al, 2014). A curriculum is developed through planning for a larger programme of study and then building syllabi for courses to manifest the curriculum design and plan.

Van den Akker (2003) captures the broad and all-encompassing nature of a curriculum when he pictures it as a spider web. All its components are connected and thus an imbalance will deform or even destroy it.

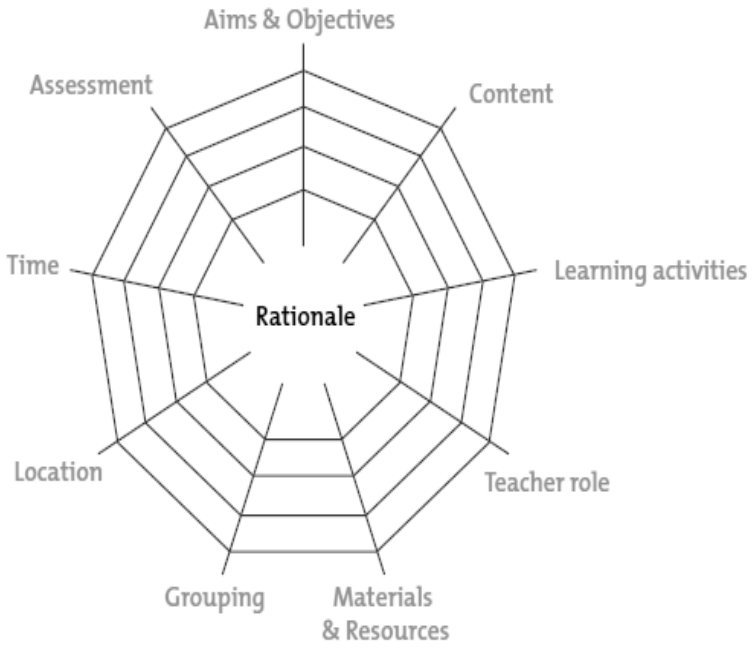
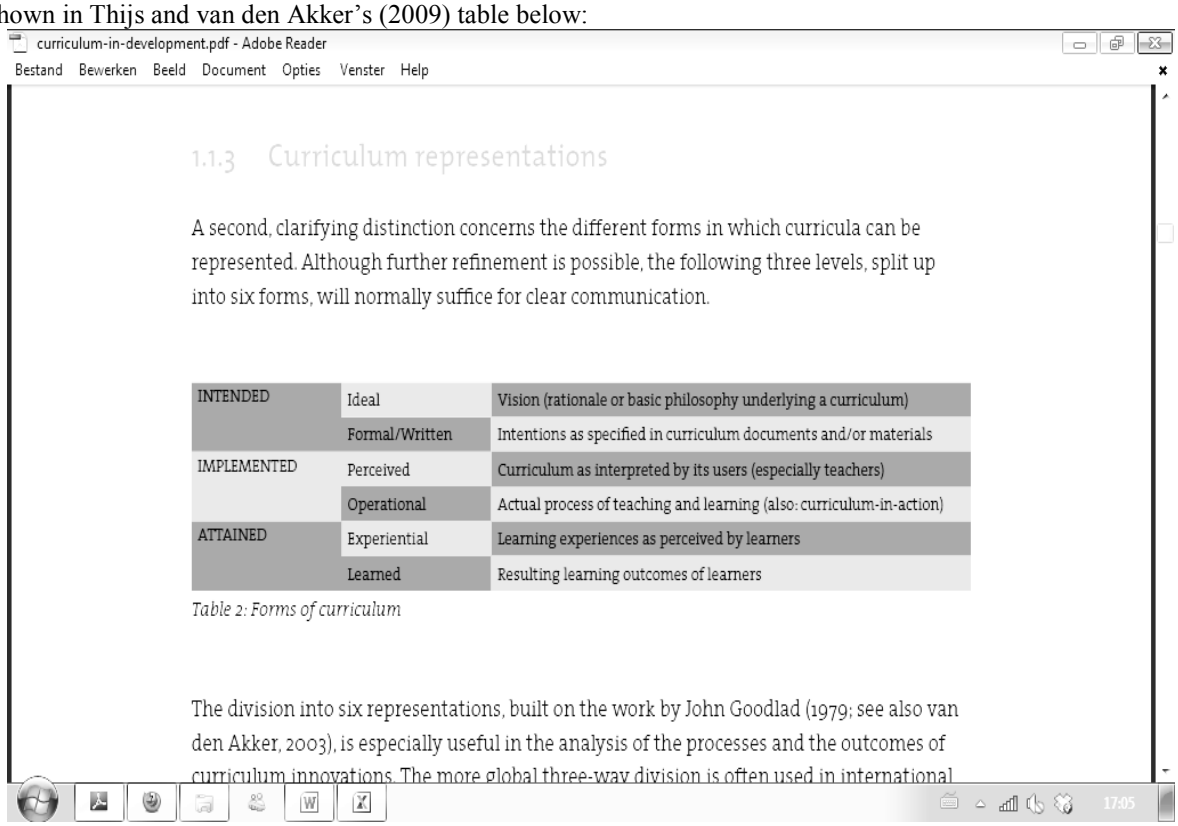


Figure 1: The curricula spider web (van den Akker, 2003).

Curriculum is understood at three levels: intended, implemented and attained curriculum. This is well shown in Thijs and van den Akker's (2009) table below: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1.1.3 Curriculum representations

A second, clarifying distinction concerns the different forms in which curricula can be represented. Although further refinement is possible, the following three levels, split up into six forms, will normally suffice for clear communication.

INTENDED	Ideal	Vision (rationale or basic philosophy underlying a curriculum)
	Formal/Written	Intentions as specified in curriculum documents and/or materials
IMPLEMENTED	Perceived	Curriculum as interpreted by its users (especially teachers)
	Operational	Actual process of teaching and learning (also: curriculum-in-action)
ATTAINED	Experiential	Learning experiences as perceived by learners
	Learned	Resulting learning outcomes of learners

Table 2: Forms of curriculum

The division into six representations, built on the work by John Goodlad (1979; see also van den Akker, 2003), is especially useful in the analysis of the processes and the outcomes of curriculum innovations. The more global three-way division is often used in international

Figure 2: Forms of curriculum (Thijs and van den Akker, 2009, p10)

Thus, in Zimbabwe the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) is responsible for the *intended* curriculum, while the actual teaching is the *implemented* curriculum. Generally, teachers struggle to cover the content of the curriculum. They struggle to implement all of the intended curriculum

Curriculum, in its broadest sense, lists all courses offered at a specific school, or in a given country. A curriculum is thus, prescriptive, and therefore issued by the governing body. It lists a defined and prescribed course of studies students must fulfil in order to complete a programme. As observed by White (1988), a curriculum is a very general concept, involving consideration of philosophical, social and administrative factors contributing to the planning of an educational programme.

The foregoing shows that a curriculum serves various purposes. Hlebowitsh (2004), summarises these purposes by stating that curricula may:

- refer to all courses offered at a school;
- refer to a defined and prescribed course of studies;
- list course of studies which students must fulfil in order to pass a certain level of education; and
- discuss how the sum of lessons and teachings will help students learn the basics (Hlebowitsh, 2004).

To simplify the exposition on curriculum given above, in the Zimbabwean context, a curriculum is understood at both national and institution (school / college / university) level. At national level a curriculum is prescribed by the government through the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU). For example, at secondary school level, curriculum would refer to all courses and subjects offered by the secondary school system in the country. At school level this would mean all courses and subjects offered by that school.

A curriculum is thus, broader than a syllabus. In fact, a syllabus is derived from a curriculum. In other words, in the formal education system, you cannot design a syllabus without designing a curriculum first.

3. Syllabus

Like the curriculum, the design and development of the national syllabus for secondary school subjects is usually centralised at national level and thus done by a government department. Schools are only there to implement the national syllabus. In Zimbabwe, the government department responsible for designing secondary school national syllabi is the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU). The CDU syllabi are the national official and legal documents teachers use when teaching their specialised subjects.

Standard dictionaries trace the origins of the word *syllabus* from the Greek *σίττυβας* (meaning table of contents) which first occurred in a 15th-century print of Cicero's letters to Atticus and Latin *syllabus* (meaning list) (Oxford English Dictionary, 2005).

A syllabus is described as a contract between teachers and their students, designed to answer students' questions about a course, as well as inform them about what will happen should they fail to meet course expectations (Slattery and Carlson, 2005). Habanek (2005: 63) sees it as a "vehicle for expressing accountability and commitment".

According to Okai (2010), the term syllabus refers to an outline or list of topics students are supposed study in a given year or specified period of learning. Syllabi are therefore brief outlines of lessons, or aspects of the curriculum that list topics to be taught in a given course or programme. These outlines of syllabi guide teachers on the extent of work involved in given classes. However, the term syllabus can only be discussed meaningfully in terms of content consideration in the curriculum. A syllabus is part of the curriculum and not the curriculum itself.

As observed by Habanek (2005) a syllabus ensures a fair and impartial understanding between teachers and their students so that there is minimal confusion on policies relating to the course. He believes that a syllabus sets clear expectations of material to be learned, behaviour in the classroom, and effort on students' behalf to be put into the course. As such, it is a roadmap of course direction that relays the teaching philosophy to students, so that students may choose early in the course whether the subject material is attractive to them. The syllabus also gives generalized information on grading policy, grading rubric, late work policy, locations and times, other contact information for teachers (phone or email), textbooks, assigned reading books, calculators, tutor locations, resource centers, important dates in course such as exams and paper due-dates, tips for succeeding in mastering course content such as study habits and expected time allotment, necessary pre-requisites or co-requisites to current course, safety rules if appropriate, and objectives of the course.

When planning for the national syllabus, planning authorities have to consider the following and many other related factors:

- the philosophy of the nation;
- the age ability of the learner;
- learning items and content;
- teachers and other resource persons; and
- sequential arrangement of learning material (Okai, 2010).

With these considerations in mind, the topics to be learnt must proceed from known to unknown. For example in the case of history, one should start with local and indigenous history before exploring topics that are external to the pupils' immediate environment.

A syllabus contains the aims and assessment objectives of the subject (for example history) at a particular level of education, the sequence of the content knowledge to be taught, and the assessment procedures to be adopted.

Sometimes the national syllabus is too broad that it cannot be completed in a period of two years as is the case with the Zimbabwean Advanced Level Literature in English or History syllabi. Heads of departments and subject teachers should then prepare and develop their own school syllabus derived from this broader national syllabus. Even when the syllabus can be completed within the course time frame, it is still important that teachers make their own school syllabus as derived from the national syllabus so that they have a simpler school based document. According to Taruvinga and Moyo (2000), this school syllabus serves as the point of reference for the schemes of work.

From the above exposition we deduce that a syllabus differs from a curriculum in that a curriculum is a more generalised or an overview of the sum total of subjects or topics that the students are meant to learn. A syllabus is a more detailed overview of the subject of study like African History. To illustrate, a mathematics curriculum may list basics of algebra, basics of geometry and basics of trigonometry. While, the class syllabus lists what topics will be covered under each of the basic topics, what will be the concepts that students may understand by the end of each topic, and it may even list what exercises or problems in the textbook will be covered during class. Hence, it can be said that syllabus is a subset of curriculum.

4. Schemes of Work

According to Okai (2010), at secondary school, looking at the meaning of curriculum and syllabus, the class teacher does not contribute very much in the preparation of these documents. He argues that the teacher is only involved at the level of the scheme of work, unit and lesson planning. When the curriculum and the syllabus are sent to schools by the authorities concerned, there is need to divide the yearly content of the syllabus into definite amount of work that may be covered per term. If, for instance, there were thirty topics to be covered for the Ordinary Level History for the two years, there would be about fifteen topics per year. When the history teacher splits the year's work into portions to be studied per term, month or week, we have what is called schemes of work. As such, a scheme of work describes the content and learning experiences that should be treated every term of the academic year (Okai, 2010). This scheme of work is very important to the teacher in that it guides him in planning the unit of instruction and consequently the daily lessons in line with the time available for each topic in the term. The scheme of work also guides supervisors of schools in determining the efforts of the schools and teachers towards meeting the societal demands on them. The scheme of work is aimed at serving the following purposes:

- guide to the teacher;
- organisational convenience; and
- keeping records of what is taught and what ought to be taught (Okai, 2010).

The scheme of work is broken into unit plans per month or per week. A unit plan breaks down further the scheme of work into smaller potions that can be treated within a period of week. The unit plan can therefore, be described as the organised sequence of content and learning experience derived for an analysis of the scheme of work designed to be covered by the class within a period of s week (Okai, 2010).

5. Lesson Plan

The lesson plan is the lowest or most specific level of instructional plans. It is derived from the analysis of the scheme of work / unit plan. Thus, when the unit plan is broken down into smaller topics and sub-topics, we have the lesson topics, which can be used to plan a lesson (Okai, 2010). A lesson plan could therefore, be described as a planned organised amount of subject –matter and learning experiences that the teacher will communicate to the learners with details of how instruction will take place within a lesson period. Lesson planning is an important activity for a teacher. Taruvinga and Moyo (2000) observe that a lesson plan supplies guidance and feelings of confidence to the teacher in the art of teaching. If lessons are well or pre-planned, both learning and teaching becomes simplified.

According to Okai (2010), a lesson plan is useful for the following reasons:

- the teacher follows correct steps and procedures in teaching;
- time is not wasted in the class since the period of one lesson must be used to cover the day's lesson topic;
- meaningful objectives are pursued in the lesson;
- activities are related to the content and objective;

- instructional materials are adequately selected and utilised;
- proper evaluation procedures and tools are used;
- a substitute teacher can use the lesson plan to hold on the class; and
- the most important content is identified for learners(Okai, 2010).

6. Conclusion

This paper establishes that although a curriculum is sometimes used as a synonym to syllabus or any other related educational concepts, it is generally a broader concept. It is an overall outline of the subjects to be taught, and the teaching methods for ensuring that each student has learnt the appropriate materials. A syllabus is derived from the curriculum. It is about that list of topics to be taught and learned for a specific period or programme, while scheme of work is drawn from the syllabus and broken into pieces to be taken on a termly basis. The lesson plan is a further breaking down of work to be done. Thus the curriculum and the national syllabus can be seen as broad and general statements of what is to be learned during the course study period; the scheme of work is derived from the syllabi and therefore more specific and detailed; while lesson plans are derived from schemes of work and are also more detailed and specific than the schemes of work. Curricula, syllabi, schemes of work and lesson plans are policies and documents necessary for effective teaching to occur at any level of our educational system. While the curriculum and syllabus are usually prepared by the authorities in national government offices, the schemes of work and lesson plans are prepared by the teacher.

This paper was motivated by the failure to distinguish between curriculum and syllabus by trained teachers at a secondary school. This failure to spell out the distinction between these two educational concepts means that most student teachers leave their colleges without a clear understanding of the distinction between the concepts. This shows that they are inadequately prepared, trained, supervised and supported in their work. Yet teachers are the key to effective learning. This paper thus recommends a revisit to existing teachers' colleges training strategies to ensure that they produce teachers who know their subject.

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