The shift and emphasis towards curriculum integration: Meaning and rationale

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ABSTRACT

This paper used a desk review approach to deal with the shift towards and emphasis given to integration of curriculum content. The purpose of the paper is to bring out the meaning, rationale and arguments about the concept of curriculum integration. The discourse about curriculum integration is important to the policy makers, all those involved and working as curriculum developers, and for the curriculum implementers.

Keywords: Curriculum, integration, interdisciplinary, syllabus, approach, instruction, knowledge.

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INTRODUCTION

Curriculum is by nature very dynamic (KIE, 1999). For this dynamism to be accommodated, it is a common practice that the school curriculum is reviewed from time to time to take into account new ways of organising the curriculum, new knowledge, emerging concerns, changes and challenges (Abagi et al., 2000; Kiminza, 2000). Curriculum integration is an innovation that is meant to improve the value of the curricula offered in schools.

PERCEPTIONS AND MEANING OF CURRICULUM INTEGRATION

Curriculum integration has many and varied definitions. The more common examples describe integrated curriculum as being interwoven, connected, thematic, interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, correlated, linked, and holistic in nature (Kathy, 2000). Consequently, those involved in education get confused when such terms are used to describe both similar and different practices under the general description of curriculum integration.

Curriculum integration is a student-centred approach in which students are invited to join with their teachers to plan learning experiences that address both student concerns and major social issues (Vars, 1991; Aikin, 1942). It is purposeful planning by teachers, of strategies and learning experiences to facilitate and enhance learning across key learning areas. It also refers to the demonstration by students, of knowledge and understandings, skills, and values and attitudes that transcend individual key learning areas (Vars, 1991; Aikin, 1942).

Curriculum integration does not, therefore, abandon the skills and understandings that are specific to the individual key learning areas, but it is a means of enhancing those areas that cross key learning areas (Kathy, 2000). This study by Kathy (2000) was meant to find out whether teachers of integrated English used integration as a means of enhancing learning across English language and Literature and among their constituent parts.

According to Brazee and Capelluti (1995), curriculum integration is based on a holistic view of learning and recognizes the necessity for learners to see the bigger picture rather than to require learning to be divided into small pieces. Brazee and Capelluti (1995) stated that curriculum integration should ignore traditional subject lines while exploring questions that are relevant to students. Brazee and Capelluti (1995), therefore, feel that curriculum integration is a pedagogical approach that is meant to help students build connections within and across disciplines. In the end, according to Brazee and Capelluti (1995), this approach may help students build a small set of powerful, broadly applicable concepts,

abilities and skills.

Humphreys et al. (1981) stated that an integrated study is one in which learners broadly explore knowledge in various subjects related to certain aspects of their environment. They see links among the humanities, communication arts, natural sciences, mathematics, social studies, music, and arts. Skills and knowledge are developed and applied in more than one area of study. In keeping with this thematic definition, Shoemaker (1989:10) defines an integrated curriculum as:

> … Education that is organized in such a way that it cuts across subject-matter lines, bringing together various aspects of the curriculum into meaningful association to focus upon broad areas of study. It views learning and teaching in a holistic way and reflects the real world, which is interactive.

'Interdisciplinary curriculum' is another term that is often used synonymously with integrated curriculum. It refers to a curriculum organization which cuts across subject-matter lines to focus upon comprehensive life problems or broad areas of study that bring together the various segments of the curriculum into meaningful association (Good, 1973).

Jacobs (1989) defines interdisciplinary curriculum as a knowledge view and curriculum approach that consciously applies methodology and language from more than one discipline to examine a central theme, issue, problem, topic, or experience. He further points out that explosion of knowledge, increase of state mandates related to myriad issues, fragmented teaching schedules, concerns about curriculum relevancy, and a lack of connections and relationships among disciplines have been cited as reasons for a move towards an integrated curriculum.

According to Taba (1962), integration of knowledge is important both from the standpoint of explosion and specialization of knowledge and from the standpoint of the social impact of technology. Taba (1962) observes that as the number of specialized fields increase, the pursuit of specialized subjects in school becomes increasingly fruitless, or impossible. Thus, there is need to integrate closely related disciplines so as to avoid unnecessary compartmentalisation of the curriculum.

For Shiundu and Omulando (1992), integration emphasizes the horizontal relationships between various curricula areas in an attempt to interrelate content, or learning experiences in order to enable the students to perceive a unity of knowledge. In this study, the rationale and benefits of teaching and assessing English language and Literature in an integrated manner in the Kenyan secondary schools was to be established.

Integration of subject matter, according to Blenkin and Kelly (1981), is an approach to learning that does not accept or base itself on any notion of sanctity of traditional divisions. On his part, Pring (1971) contrasts integration with fragmentation of the curriculum, which typifies the traditional school with subject barriers. He thinks that the compartmentalization or pigeonholing of knowledge is irrelevant to life as a whole. According to him, integration is connected with the natural inquiry of children, which does not respect subject divisions. He asserts that integration of subjects is a necessity if there is to be a 'truer' and more comprehensive picture of reality. He further points out that the division of knowledge into distinct subjects is artificial and does not reflect correctly the essential unity of reality.

RATIONALE FOR CURRICULUM INTEGRATION

According to Beane (1997), the philosophy behind the practice of curriculum integration stems from the view that learning occurs when new knowledge and experiences are integrated with previous learning. Such integration enables the learner to deepen and broaden his/her understanding of the world and personal place in it, as well as the directly linked notion, that in a school setting the contexts for study can aptly arise from the real needs and concerns of the learner. This approach assists in total formation of the individual learner in the world community.

Beane and Brodhagen (1996) point out that curriculum integration offers any challenging curriculum higher standards and world-class education that is so often talked about, but rarely experienced. Beane (1997) argues that teachers should push themselves beyond the conventional, separate subject format and expand their use of integrated curriculum formats, which offer a correspondingly wide range of benefits for students. The current study was purposed to find out whether teachers of the integrated English curriculum went beyond the traditional teaching of English language and Literature as two separate subjects, and also their various constituent parts as separate entities.

Hirst (1974) and Hirst and Peters (1970) suggest that an integrated curriculum could be justified through a view of knowledge that is unified or perhaps even chaotic in nature. In a logical extension of this view, Hirst (1974) explains that subjects restrict pupils' thinking and development by making the process of learning artificial and alien compared with their life experiences. In one sense, it would appear that curriculum integration has some intrinsic virtue, in terms of the way that knowledge is organized as connected, embodied, ecological, harmonized knowledge (Venville et al., 2001). Under this view of knowledge, the learner is seen to be at one with nature, entwined and implicated in local and global conditions, large and small (Davis et al., 2000).

Cumming (1994a) draws a number of studies that show among other things that a significant number of pupils find the traditional curriculum lacks relevance and

cohesion, the teaching practices are alienating or simply boring, and schools consist of rigid structures and procedures. Venville et al. (2001), in their work on curriculum integration, observe several instances of classroom environments that held pupils' interest and enhanced learning across the curriculum. These lessons were characterized by high levels of teacher and pupil engagement and interaction. They point out that pupils in these classes had a clear sense of direction and the work was cognitively challenging. They further point out that participants were emotionally involved and there was a high level of trust and co-operation, and that teachers regularly made links to the real world and to other disciplines. This view resonates with Freire's (1973) advocacy for transformative education which is juxtaposed with banking education.

Venville et al. (2001), in summary, argue that integration enhances pupil engagement with the school. They point out that several studies show that providing an authentic curriculum well connected to pupils' needs and interests, and to the world outside of school, can result in reducing alienation and raising participation and engagement. They further say that this authenticity is associated with integrating across the disciplines and sometimes it is to be found within a disciplinary paradigm. The current study sought to check whether secondary integrated English curriculum enhances learning across English language and Literature, and if classroom lessons are characterized by high levels of teacher and student engagement and interaction.

In arguing for integrative curriculum, National Middle School Association (NMSA) (1995) called for learning experiences that are organized around real-life issues and problems significant both to young and adults. In examining these issues, students draw on pertinent content and skills from many subject areas and acquire many of the "common learnings" or life skills essential for all citizens (Vars, 2000b). In the integrative approach, the emphasis is on higher-order thinking processes, co-operative learning, and thoughtful consideration of human values, rather than the details of separate subjects. The intent is to make students make sense out of their life experiences (NMSA, 1995).

According to Beane (1997), the integrated curriculum design underscores the importance of four types of relationships that affect how students learn: relationships between the learner and the content; relationships between the learner and the teacher; relationships among the learners and; relationships within the content itself. The study checked out on how secondary integrated English curriculum design affected how students learnt and interacted with the content, their teachers and among themselves.

Beane (1997) asserts that as the quality of the stated relationships improves - individually and collectively - students' success in mastering skills and concepts and more complex levels of thinking also improve. Therefore,

integrated curriculum formats address and promote these four types of relationships more effectively than does the conventional, separate-subject curriculum. Because integrated curriculum strategies focus directly and purposefully on all four of these crucial relationships simultaneously, such strategies foster student success on many levels. According to Beane (1997) the greater the degree of integration, the greater the benefits. Students participating in full integrative programs tend to exhibit high levels of commitment, energy and performance, while assuming greater responsibility for learning and their actions.

Beane (1997) further points out that students in integrated curricula generally do well or better on standardized tests than students in conventional curricula. In fact, Beane maintains that, properly constructed and implemented, integrated curricula can improve test scores because the emphasis on the four sets of relationships increases students' motivation to learn. Increased student motivation enhances their abilities to master concepts, including those that may appear on standardized tests. Integrated instruction helps teachers better utilize instructional time and look deeper into subjects through a variety of content-specific lens.

Another benefit of integrated instruction is that teachers can better differentiate instruction to individual student needs. Integrated instruction also allows for authentic assessment (Barton and Smith, 2000). Interdisciplinary teaching gives students a chance to work with multiple sources of information, thus ensuring they are receiving a more inclusive perspective than they would from consulting one textbook (Wood, 1997).

Educational researchers in some countries have found that an integrated curriculum can result in greater intellectual curiosity, improved attitude towards schools, enhanced problem-solving skills, and higher achievement in schools (Austin et al., 1997; Kain, 1993). According to Wolf and Brandt (1998), one of the best ways to promote problem-solving is through an enhanced environment that makes connections among several disciplines. Vars (1996) asserts that students in interdisciplinary programs do as well as, and often better than, students in so-called conventional programs. In other words, educators who carefully implement any of the various types of interdisciplinary approaches can be reasonably assured that there will be no appreciable loss in student learning, except perhaps, for the temporary "implementation dip" that occurs whenever people try anything new.

Some schools have used an integrated curriculum as a way of making education relevant and thus a way to keep students interested in school (Kain, 1993). Kain further asserts that schools report higher attendance rate when students are engaged in an integrated curriculum. Having the opportunity to utilize knowledge and skills from several disciplines does offer increased opportunities for making the curriculum relevant. However, it may not be true that if a curriculum is integrated, it will automatically

mean that it is relevant.

Another premise supporting the move towards integrated curricula is that an education system that is discipline-based is not as effective as it should be. The assumption is that most real world problems are multi-disciplinary in nature and that discipline-based curriculum is unable to engage students in real world situations. Thus, a discipline-based curriculum should be replaced with an integrated curriculum (Kain, 1993).

Kelly (1982) suggests that the integrated curriculum is part of a move towards a more 'open' society in which knowledge is freely available. He also suggests that curriculum integration produces a different attitude to knowledge in learners- a greater willingness to share and collaborate. The whole substance of inter-student relationship is changed. This goes for student-teacher relationship too. Kelly further points out that some themes can only be dealt with in an integrated curriculum. Blenkin and Kelly (1981) suggest that problems of organization have led to an unbalanced curriculum for many individual learners - hence the present concern for the whole curriculum.

Pring (1976) describes the subject-based curriculum as being fragmented, apathy-inducing, artificially restricting, unrelated, irrelevant and duplicating. He suggests three reasons for advocating an integrated curriculum: respect for the varied mental activities of learners; recognition of the commonsense language and understandings through which learners already engage in this mental life and to which the more disciplined modes of inquiry must be related; and the need for a more flexible and cooperative teaching framework.

Gillard (1987) argues that curriculum integration comes in a variety of forms. However, he is convinced that anything that breaks down the traditional subject barriers and makes knowledge more meaningful, relevant and stimulating for learners must be in the interest of effective education. Curriculum integration enables teachers and learners to identify and utilize the connections between syllabuses. Its primary purpose is to enhance and maximize learning both within and across the key learning areas of the curriculum.

Through curriculum integration, teachers plan for the development of key skills and understandings that transcend individual strands and syllabuses. In practice, curriculum integration enables students to acquire a unified view of the curriculum, broadening the context of their learning beyond single key learning areas (Jacobs, 1989; Shoemaker, 1989).

The teaching of English is concerned with enabling the learners to write and speak with facility in ways appropriate to a variety of contexts (Arden, 1988; Dunk and Wiley, 1987). Integration, therefore, enhances communicative competence in the learners (Omollo, 1990). Arden (1988:57) poses the following questions:

> Can a teacher teach poetry or prose lesson and
> ignore vocabulary, special expressions or

unusual grammatical structures? Can a teacher really concentrate on theme, character and plot and ignore language completely? Similarly when a teacher teaches grammar, should he ignore the fact that writers are actually using grammar in context, whether fiction or non-fiction? When you read a passage as a reading comprehension, should you ignore imagery and style simply because you were supposed to be answering questions on the context of the passage?

According to Jacobs (1989) and Shoemaker (1989), curriculum integration is an important aspect of learning because it enables the students to: i) identify both the distinctive qualities and the related elements of the key learning areas, ii) utilize acquired skills and prior knowledge in different contexts iii) demonstrate their skills and understandings in a variety of learning contexts, and iv) make connections more easily between the content they learn in school and their out-of-school experiences.

Jacobs (1989) and Shoemaker (1989) further argue that curriculum integration is an important aspect of secondary curriculum organization because it enables the teacher to: identify connections within and between English language and Literature; provide a relevant context for learning based on the needs of students; assess students' skills and understandings in a variety of learning contexts; and manage comprehensive programs covering all key areas of English language and Literature. Therefore, an integrated approach better reflects what children learn in English language and Literature. Through planning and programming integrated learning experiences, teachers enable students to make connections and to understand relationships within and between English language and Literature. Teachers, therefore, have an important task to maintain and enhance the integration of English language and Literature.

There is a strong belief among those who support curriculum integration that schools must look at education as a process for developing abilities required by life in the twenty-first century, rather than discrete departmentalized subject matter (Jacobs, 1989; Shoemaker, 1989). Cromwell (1989) points out that the brain organizes new knowledge on the basis of experiences and the meaning that has developed from those experiences. The brain processes many things at the same time, and holistic experiences are recalled quickly and easily. Caine and Caine (1991) add that the brain may resist learning fragmented facts that are presented in isolation. Learning is, therefore, believed to occur faster and more thoroughly when it is presented in meaningful contexts, with an experiential component.

An enduring argument for curriculum integration is that it represents a way to avoid the fragmented and irrelevant acquisition of isolated facts, transforming knowledge into useful tools for learning new information (Lipson et al.,

1993). They further assert that curriculum integration: helps students to apply skills; leads to faster retrieval of information; leads to a more integrated knowledge base; encourages depth and breadth in learning, promotes positive attitudes in students; and provides for a more quality time for curriculum exploration.

MAJOR ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR OF CURRICULUM INTEGRATION

In summary, the major arguments in favour of curriculum integration are: Students are more highly motivated and learn better because integrative curriculum relates to their needs, problems, concerns, interests, and aspirations (Faunce and Bossing, 1958); Students learn better because integrative curriculum is more compatible with the way the brain works, thus enhancing the development of higher-order thinking skills (Canine and Caine, 1991; Hart, 1983); Students are better prepared for life in contemporary society because integrative curriculum addresses current social problems in all their real-life complexity (Til, 1976); Students learn major concepts and processes of the disciplines through studying carefully designed integrated units (Erickson, 1998; Jacobs, 1989); Integrative curriculum provides a coherent core of common learnings essential for all citizens (Beane, 1997); and integrative curriculum provides a meaningful framework for examining values (Apple and Beane, 1995).

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