AN ESSAY-REVIEW OF WILLIAM PINAR, UNDERSTANDING CURRICULUM

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Abstract: Professor P. Klohr, the author of this analysis, was an outstanding representative of Philosophy and Theory of Education in America. Descending from the progressive movement, and a disciple of Boy Bode, P. Klohr has had the chance to know the American school, and its problems, better than many of his colleagues. In this article, as the author says, Pinar and his associates give the message that when educators begin to work to solve some of the issues of progress/difference, universality/particularity, regularity/irregularity, there will begin to be genuine curriculum reform. And this volume serves as bridge between the dominant modern theory base and the exciting postmodern world of theory and practice.

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Without question, this comprehensive view of the curriculum field is the most significant publication since the last widely used volume William Schubert wrote in 1986¹. Both are synoptic texts in that they give in historical, philosophical background to curriculum studies as well as surveying the major contemporary efforts underway.

But more than the Schubert volume, Pinar's new work assays the field from a postmodern perspective. It presents, therefore, nothing short of a major historic breakthrough. It moves an analysis of the field from the dominant, modern technological rationale to a postmodern perspective. At last, Thomas Kuhn's 1962/70 thesis² of a major paradigm shift is clearly a critics! factor in curriculum theorizing.

The so-called Reconceptualists in curriculum field have been largely responsible for this shift. Pinar has been a significant leader in this movement. In the 1970's and 1980's, such individuals were often


characterized as the young “romantic critics”, not unlike the radicals of the 1960’s proposing basic changes in American education — John Holt, Paul Goodman, Edgard Friedenberg. These individuals were then viewed as a fringe ground- whose influence, at best, would be quite marginal. This clearly proved not to be the case with the Reconceptualists. They were first recognized as emerging influence in curriculum theorizing in Schubert's 1986 publication. Since then, their influence has grown. Pinar's volume is a clear demonstration of this fact.

First of all, it is a comprehensive treatment of the field, in paperback, a book of 1143 pages. But its scope does not detract from its readability. In effect, it is not a handbook or only a reference source. It is best seen as a "story" to be told, and the style and format supports this intent.

In 1981, Pinar began the effort that led to the book. In the preface, he calls the book “a cacophony of voices” (p. xiii) rather than a “master” narrative. Further in this explanation of the writing, Pinar states: “What you will read is what the field is saying, or has been saying during its more or less one hundred year history, emphasizing the last twenty years.” (p. xiv). It is important to note this historical control to the reporting of the contemporary scenes for it is one of the major strengths of the book. The writing makes the individuals involved “come alive.” We see where they are coming from, what has influenced them, what they are thinking now, and where this thinking might take them in the future. Readers will sense how different this is from the conventional reporting of historical events and the actors involved. In effect, such professional reporting takes on a literary quality not often found in professional literature. This kind of reporting, Pinar is convinced, leads more fully to an “understanding” of the field --- hence, the title. It is the “verstehen” that some German social scientists seek.

The book consists of fourteen chapters and a concluding chapter titled “A Postscript for the Next Generation” After an introductory chapter, there follow three chapters that narrate the historical discourses of the field 1828-1979. Charter 4 in this section ends with an account of the work of individuals like Dwayne Huebner and James Macdonald who were the forerunners of the Reconceptualists who first emerged on the national scene in 1973 at the Rochester Curriculum conference convened by Pinar. The papers from this conference are compiled in a volume titled
Heightened Consciousness, Cultural Revolution, and Curriculum Theory\(^1\). It became the first in a series of publications that constitute the historical archives of the movement.

The following year in 1975, Pinar edited a significant collection of papers titled Curriculum Theorizing: The Reconceptualists\(^2\) which served to extend further the theoretical base for this major paradigm shift in the field. The chapters following the first section of the book under review here report the background of these events and the ferment they triggered in the curriculum field dominated by the so-called Tyler rationale and the technological, approaches to curriculum this rationale nourished. This kind of reporting contributes to the rich contextual understanding of historical background of these decades of change.

Pinar then turns to a contemporary curriculum discourse (or multiple discourses) that characterize the period 1980-1994 in the next eight chapters in which the book illustrates the “balkanization” of the contemporary field.

The field as a “political text” is narrated. Then follow chapters on the field as a “racial text,” a “gender text”, a “phenomenological text”, a “deconstructed text,” an “aesthetic text,” and a “theological text.” In each of these discourses, Pinar lets the authors speak for themselves from the special contexts that share their views. This approach gives authenticity to the discourse not often found in synoptic texts. It provides a panorama of key scholars “at work” -- almost as if the reader were following them around as they talked about their efforts and projected what might take place next in the curriculum field.

Pinar's own scholarship is presented in one of the chapters titled “Autobiographical/biographical text”. This approach has its roots in Pinar's use of the term “currere”, the Latin for “running the course”. He elaborates a method by means of which curricularists can sketch the relations among school knowledge, life history, and intellectual development. The intent is to strive toward self-transformation. Also an advocate of this approach to understanding curriculum is the work of William Ayers whose use of biography and autobiography gives an understanding of how curriculum is experienced by those who live it day

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by day. Janet Miller and Madeleine Grumet, two scholars recognized for their work in feminist and gender theory, also contribute to this narrative. Although the field has been balkanized by various specialized theoretical approaches, there is also clearly overlap among these subfields. The boundaries are not hard and fast. This fact gives promise to new constellations or networks that can build on the strengths of several.

Like most postmodern theorists, Pinar is reluctant to project where the many highly individual perspectives might go in the next decade. The modern perspective built on concepts like “progress,” “universality”, and “regularity” are clearly not adequate. These were the under-pinnings of basically a technological rationale for educational research and practice. The widely used “Tyler rationale” is a good example of this approach. It dominated (and still does to a great degree) curriculum development efforts. The current example in U.S.A. is the establishment of national standards. However broad and general they may be, this rationale suggests that education should be geared toward having all children within the society progress toward common goals. The modern idea is based on the assumption of uniform standards that should hold for all children across the nation.

Underlying the modern conception of education is the assumption that tests to assess and grades to report academic progress is the most desirable evaluation procedure. These efforts suppose a regularity in student achievement and comprehension that all students will interpret and answer questions with a common perspective. This basic concept of regularity operates for teachers as well as for students. In effect, teachers are expected to run their classrooms "by the book."

Post modernism underlying such curricular approaches as those advanced by Pinar and recognizes that there is much in the old that is of value when fused with the new. Philosophically, such a fusion embodies many of John Dewey's progressive education concepts as well as those of in emerging group of neopragmatists led by "contemporary thinkers such as Richard Rorty, Cornel West, Charles Taylor and John Rawls. These philosophers extend the thinking of Dewey into the postmodern world. Their work is basic to an understanding of the future of education both in U.S. A. and the wider world.

A common theme of the postmodern curriculum theorits is that of an integrated curriculum — one that recognizes the artificiality of the barriers that are assumed to exist between the academic disciplines. This approach requires cooperation, planning and preparation among teachers to
eliminate the barriers between fields and permit students thereby to understand the interdisciplinary character of knowledge.

A second characteristic theme of the postmodern curriculum development involves a thesis that reform will most effectively take place when each school is finally shaped by its own people and by involvement of those in the community it serves. This is a principle of “particularity”. In effect, good schools may well be quite different from each other rather than the same.

This brief overview gives something of the picture that Pinar and associates give in the concluding chapter of the book. Their message is that when educators begin to work to resolve some of the issues of progress/difference, universality/particularity, regularity/irregularity, there will begin to be genuine curriculum reform. This volume serves as a bridge between the dominant modern theory base and the exciting postmodern world of theory and practice.