



Curriculum theory: Empowering teachers in delivering effective teaching for children's holistic development

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ABSTRACT

The significance of curriculum in education cannot be underestimated, as it enables teachers to know what to teach during teaching and learning. The dominant curriculum used in schools today is a scripted curriculum that does not allow teachers to see learners as co-creators in constructing knowledge. Many teachers find it challenging to adjust this curriculum to the interests and abilities of learners. This article aims to explore how scripted curricula can be adapted in childhood education to promote a child-centered approach that acknowledges children's knowledge, interests, needs, and abilities. This article examines 2011 to 2024 peer-reviewed articles that emphasize curriculum flexibility and students' involvement in creating knowledge with 104 articles. The findings show that teachers need the knowledge of curriculum theory to modify and implement scripted curriculum in a way that is inclusive and culturally responsive to all learners. This knowledge will enable teachers to deliver instruction capable of motivating learners to work at their own pace and participate in meaningful and rewarding learning experiences.

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ABSTRAK

Pentingnya kurikulum dalam pendidikan tidak dapat diremehkan, karena kurikulum memungkinkan guru untuk mengetahui apa yang harus diajarkan selama proses belajar mengajar. Kurikulum dominan yang digunakan di sekolah saat ini adalah kurikulum tertulis yang tidak memungkinkan guru untuk melihat peserta didik sebagai rekan pencipta dalam membangun pengetahuan. Banyak guru merasa sulit untuk menyesuaikan kurikulum ini dengan minat dan kemampuan peserta didik. Tujuan artikel ini adalah untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana kurikulum tertulis dapat diadaptasi dalam pendidikan anak usia dini untuk mempromosikan pendekatan yang berpusat pada anak yang mengakui pengetahuan, minat, kebutuhan, dan kemampuan anak-anak. Artikel ini mengkaji artikel yang ditinjau sejawat dari tahun 2011 hingga 2024 yang menekankan fleksibilitas kurikulum dan keterlibatan siswa dalam penciptaan pengetahuan menggunakan 104 artikel. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pengetahuan teori kurikulum dibutuhkan oleh guru untuk memodifikasi dan menerapkan kurikulum tertulis dengan cara yang inklusif dan responsif secara budaya terhadap semua peserta didik. Pengetahuan ini memungkinkan guru untuk memberikan instruksi yang mampu memotivasi peserta didik untuk bekerja sesuai kecepatan mereka sendiri dan berpartisipasi dalam pengalaman belajar yang bermakna dan bermanfaat.

Kata Kunci: kurikulum tertulis; minat peserta didik; praktik pembelajaran; teori kurikulum

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INTRODUCTION

The history of curriculum highlights Bobbitt's contribution to curriculum development (Au, 2011; Liu, 2017). Bobbitt showcased an industrial education model similar to Taylor's scientifically controlled curriculum for education to create a structured path to teaching and learning (Cathal, 2021). This views education as an industry where school administrators manage (Au, 2011), teachers obey instructions, and children are converted from raw materials to products (Khaira et al., 2023). This suggests that teachers, as laborers, need to work with organized materials that have been structured to be used as a model for their teaching to produce a meaningful and desirable outcome. This organized material is what is called a "scripted curriculum."

The adverse effect of scripted curriculum on teachers and pupils in childhood education classrooms is seen in how children retain knowledge because this curriculum promotes rote learning that makes every child learn the same thing in the same way (uniform learning) and makes teachers stick to the same standard of teaching and prevent them from adjusting their teaching to the needs of the students in their classrooms (Rege et al., 2021). Research has been conducted on different curriculum areas, such as curriculum development, curriculum design, and implementation. Despite the tons of literature on this subject area, there is limited literature on studies that explain how curriculum theory, which is teacher-centered, can be used to promote a child-centered approach in childhood education. This article explores how curriculum theory can be adapted to promote child-centered approaches to instruction. This study explains the effect of structured curricula on children's learning and development. It explores how structured curricula can be adapted in childhood education to promote a child-centered approach that acknowledges children's knowledge, interests, needs, and abilities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature established that the scripted curriculum does not acknowledge the significance of teachers' judgment as professionals on the "what, why, and the process" of their instruction in implementing the curriculum. This makes teachers see this curriculum as not culturally responsive and does not motivate students to engage in meaningful learning experiences based on their knowledge and abilities (Nadelson et al., 2024). The dominant administrative responsibility that compels teachers to follow structured curriculum content and a particular mode of delivering the content presents classroom instruction as a technical task where teachers do not have power over what to teach based on the student's abilities in the classroom. This has shifted teachers' focus on creativity and the need to consider children's needs, abilities, and interests in teaching and learning (Poulton & Mockler, 2023). This situation prevents teachers from teaching with a knowledge-led curriculum that emerges from the learners, emphasizing individual child knowledge, background, needs, and capabilities. This makes teaching and learning interactive and exciting for every child within childhood education classrooms (Deng, 2022).

The early childhood stage is where children learn through experiential learning and exploration. Studies have shown that scripted curricula limit how children explore and engage in self-discovery activities. Children retain knowledge when they are actively engaged in classroom instruction. However, the structured curriculum uses a teacher-centered method, which does not acknowledge meaningful learning and equitable opportunity for all children. This curriculum promotes a banking education system where knowledge is deposited in children's brains, forgetting that children are active agents in the construction of knowledge. Therefore, children should be allowed to co-construct knowledge and develop the curriculum with them. Learning becomes exciting and seamless when the curriculum emerges from the learner, promoting children's creativity, self-discovery, and participation in the classroom (Appova et al., 2022).

Research and theories have shown that involving children in the teaching and learning process has a positive and lasting effect on their behavior and academic performance (Nesbitt & Farran, 2021). Many theories, such as Piaget's cognitive developmental theory, Vygotsky's sociocultural and social constructivism theory, and Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, frown at scripted curricula. Despite that, the curriculum provides consistency of instruction. They believe it does not allow children to interact and feel engaged with their environment. It does not give children the freedom to construct their knowledge and use their experiences, adversely affecting their cognitive, emotional, and social development. These theorists believed that social engagement is essential for children's learning and development as well as their well-being in general and that structured curricula do not acknowledge the crucial role of social interaction and engagement of children with the environment in promoting teaching and learning in childhood education (Abacioglu et al., 2023; Miller, 2022; Saracho, 2021). The mandated use of a scripted curriculum for instruction does not align with many teachers' professional beliefs, sometimes making teachers and the curricula opposite (Nadelson et al., 2024). This implies that teachers cannot assume the role of authority in their teaching methods and instructional delivery due to the specific curricula they must follow. It is pertinent for the 21st-century curriculum to equip children with the skills, experiences, and understanding required to excel in this ever-dynamic world and make teaching learners-centered to achieve meaningful learning outcomes as they pass through the childhood stage (Jaramillo & Chiappe, 2024).

METHODS

This article explores 2011 to 2024 peer-reviewed articles that emphasize curriculum flexibility, students' involvement in the creation of knowledge, and studies that allow teachers to utilize curricula in a way that promotes teacher autonomy, learners' needs, abilities, and interests to achieve active engagement of learners and appreciate the experiences learners bring into the classrooms using qualitative method. One hundred and four articles were examined, and only thirty-nine were selected after a thorough review. Theories that support learners' creativity and critical thinking and promote learners' individuality, such as Piaget's cognitive developmental theory, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, and Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, were used to support the argument of this article.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the literature review, the following are the ways curriculum can be used to promote a child-centered approach in childhood education classrooms.

Curriculum in Childhood Education

The curriculum is a complex and nuanced dialogue between educators and learners, encompassing discussions on past events, the present moment, and future aspirations (Harrison, 2022). The curriculum encompasses the fundamental principles, ethical standards, cognitive dispositions, proficiencies, and comprehensive body of information that constitute the essence of education (Mulenga, 2018). A curriculum in childhood education (CE) that suggests classroom instruction based on students' interests is the emergent curriculum, although not widely used in preschool (Nxumalo et al., 2018).

Gonzalez et al., in the book titled "*Theory and Application of an Emergent Curriculum*" explain that an emergent curriculum looks more into the needs and interests of the learners because it encourages learning by doing, where teachers allow the learners to co-construct learning experiences and explore their environment to develop the problem-solving skills needed as they grow into adults. Through an emergent curriculum, children learn through experimentation, which enhances knowledge acquisition through practical ways and discovery (Uyen et al., 2022). This implies that an emergent curriculum enables teachers to help children improve their cognitive, emotional, and physical abilities. When children explore and experiment, they discover things based on their capabilities and level of reasoning.

Curriculum emerges from children's experiences where teachers serve as the facilitators in helping children construct their learning experiences in a way that is most meaningful to them and not by depositing in them the knowledge that might not be useful to them (Speldewinde et al., 2024). Children's voices are heard through an emergent curriculum that enables them to showcase their talent, skills, and knowledge to people around them. This curriculum does not only focus on children. As noted by Gonzalez et al., an emergent curriculum enables teachers to create individualized learning experiences based on children's classroom needs, interests, and abilities. This helps teachers have an inclusive classroom where teachers and children have reciprocal responsibilities. Emergent curriculum is rooted in theories such as cognitive constructivism, pragmatism, social constructivism, experiential learning theory, and connectivism, to mention a few.

Teachers must diligently acquire knowledge and comprehend the curriculum (Wan, 2023). This indicates that teachers' role cannot be underestimated in the implementation and continuity of the curriculum. Teachers need in-depth knowledge of the steps needed to implement the curriculum successfully. This is why teachers need an idea of curriculum theory that guides them in understanding the rudiments and concepts behind curriculum development and its delivery in schools for successful instruction. Teachers need to understand and acknowledge the prior experiences of each child to align their teaching with those experiences (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024). This will make the application of the curriculum have positive outcomes on learners' academic performance. Having knowledge of curriculum theory and how it can be modified to cater to the needs of children can help

teachers create a community that is supportive and inclusive by building positive and lasting relationships with all children regardless of their differences and can also help to develop diverse teaching skills that can be used to teach in different situations. The system of education we are practicing does not promote equitable treatment among children; knowledge and understanding of the curriculum will assist teachers in promoting equity among the children by tailoring their teaching to the needs of the children (Coker et al., 2023).

Curriculum Theory in Childhood Education

Curriculum theory in childhood education has provided the foundation for various curricula apart from the emergent curriculum explained above, such as hidden, persistent, Reggio Emilia, and Montessori curricula, among others (Aljabreen, 2020). The distinctive features of these curricula affirm the importance of childhood educators' knowledge of children's learning and developmental stages during childhood and their understanding of how children actively participate in educational activities in classroom settings (Wood & Hedges, 2016). Childhood educators' knowledge of curriculum theory is essential in facilitating effective communication and conceptualization of ideas and objectives relating to children's learning experiences that guarantee the achievement of desirable goals and objectives within the educational setting (Shafarwati, 2023). This implies that teachers must have a vast comprehension of the curriculum pertinent to children's education, which the curriculum theory presents. Childhood education teachers' understanding of curriculum theory is required to equip them with the necessary tools to understand different instructional opportunities for children and be able to instruct children with diverse interests and needs without difficulty. Despite the importance of knowing curriculum theory, many teachers find it challenging to understand it because it involves intricate planning in considering how every child can be represented in the implementation to achieve desirable outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024). Teachers must engage in professional development training and attend seminars that will keep them updated on various teaching techniques in their chosen profession and empower them to link learners' past experiences to the present.

Curriculum Theory and Learners' Past Experiences

The development of educational opportunities allows learners to incorporate their respective previous experiences into their new educational experiences to promote relevant learning outcomes (Dong et al., 2020; Uyen et al., 2022) capable of relating learners' previous knowledge to the present while also building up their future interactions in connecting their past experiences to the present (Cathal, 2021). This suggests that teachers' knowledge of curriculum theory will help them bring together the real-life learning experiences that learners bring to the classroom in a way that promotes learners' intellectual abilities, history, and ways of life (Abacioglu et al., 2023). This shows the importance of activity-based learning, also called learning by doing, emphasizing that all acquired knowledge holds value. This knowledge is acquired through prior experiences, funds of knowledge, and formal education (Long & Guo, 2023). The prior experiences that every learner brings to the classroom need to be appreciated and incorporated into their learning activities and

experiences by highlighting that knowledge goes beyond the four walls of the classroom and can be attained in several ways at any time. For teachers to effectively and efficiently integrate learners' past or new knowledge into their educational experiences, they need to be proficient in making learners' past and present experiences practical in the classroom.

Curriculum Theory and Teacher Proficiency

Teachers' proficiency is enhanced through the understanding of the curriculum in both content (subject matter) and instructional strategies (method), thereby improving the achievement of the intended curricular goals (objectives), which is based on the understanding of the models involved in the delivery of the curriculum content which includes the objectives, subject matter, educational or learning experiences, methods of delivery, and assessment (Yasar & Aslan, 2021). Tyler's curriculum development model elucidates areas of lesson objectives that embody learning objectives, selections, and organization of educational experiences and evaluation (Portillo et al., 2020). Understanding all these aspects of teaching will allow the teachers to identify the areas that require more attention and integrate them into their teaching.

Teachers' ability to determine integrative and organizational activities is integral to most teacher training programs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). This includes familiarizing them with the prevalent curriculum model in their subject area or geographical location. Depending on the teacher training programs and country specifications, there is evidence that Tyler's rationale is the foundation for most curriculum models (Au, 2011). This implies that curriculum theory depends on Tyler's rationale of curriculum development in teacher training programs that introduce knowledge on curriculum delivery. Hence, the conception of the curriculum, as accelerated by curriculum theory, necessitates prioritizing the four-step process explained in Tyler's curriculum model.

Experiences in the curriculum should include human activities and experiences that learners bring to the classroom, which are part of their daily lives. These include spiritual, social, vocational, family, recreational, and intellectual engagements through reading and contemplation and other endeavors that are undertaken by individuals (Cathal, 2021). These commitments seek to support learners with the needed skills and information to navigate barriers and achieve future success. Also, according to Brandt in a book titled "*Measuring Student Success Skills: A Review of the Literature on Self-directed Learning*" these engagements are embedded within a functionalist curriculum incorporating stories or folklore to convey practical and applicable knowledge. Children love stories, and using them to impart knowledge can enhance their learning and make knowledge retention easy. Using stories as a pedagogical tool will make the teaching and learning process seamless because telling stories arouses children's interest in learning.

Curriculum Theory and Learners' Interest

Teachers need to understand the curriculum in a way that promotes learners' cognitive, emotional, social, and physical needs and interests. As educators deepen their understanding of curriculum, it is equally necessary for them to understand their students, particularly their interests and needs. Children's needs and interests can never be the same

due to individual differences among human beings (Solari et al., 2022). The educational system should not be projected as a regimented system of fixed instructional processes. Children need to be educated based on their abilities and interests. A well-grounded teacher who understands the curriculum will learn to appreciate children's individuality. In appreciating children's individuality regarding their needs, interests, and abilities, their physical developmental needs should also be considered.

Teachers need a deep understanding of their learners to establish relationships between their current interests and past experiences. Additionally, they must have a thorough knowledge of the community and subject matter to create connections to learners' future experiences (Arikpo & Domike, 2015; Zhu et al., 2021). In knowing the students, teachers should note that students' learning is not limited to the content of the curriculum but also how they view the teachers implementing the curriculum regarding the relationship between the teachers and the students and how teachers connect students' interests to learning (Solari et al., 2022). When connecting learners' interests to learning, learners need to be studied to identify their needs and interests. This study of learners goes beyond the four walls of the classroom to include the understanding of the learners' communal life (Abacioglu et al., 2023). The foundation for incorporating learners' interests and cultural backgrounds into the classroom environment can be promoted to foster productivity and contribute to the individual's personal growth to uplift the community and the entire society (Thornburn, 2020). This suggests that assessing learners' communal life, needs, interests, and teachers' subsequent modification of teaching methods are part of teachers' instructional practices to allow learners to participate and have a voice in their academic journey efficiently.

Curriculum Theory and Instructional Practices

For teachers to have good instructional practices, they need to engage in in-depth assessments concerning the substance of their instructional resources and the underlying reasons driving them. One of the underlying reasons driving teachers' instructional practices includes teachers' care of the students, which Zhu et al. highlighted as a vital lens for curriculum delivery (Zhu et al., 2021). In choosing how instruction should be delivered, teachers must consider student variables, including their interests, needs, and abilities. Additionally, Poulton stressed the significance of teachers gaining power over the curriculum and resources used for the implementation as they are the agency through which the curriculum is delivered (Poulton, 2020). This explains the notion of Pugach et al. that the theory of curriculum forces educators to reflect deeply and thoroughly regarding what we teach and the reason behind the teaching, going above planning for lessons, activities, topic patterns, and other required procedures to include knowing how to comprehend many areas of child development and their potential use in promoting the holistic development of children (Pugach et al., 2019). At the formative stage of child development, cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills cannot be underrated because they are interconnected, and they all play a significant role in children's learning by contributing to their overall academic performance and achievement. The development of every child in these three areas varies with their individual needs and interests. Children gain various skills at different stages, so teachers' comprehension of the curriculum is needed to effectively support and promote the children's learning and development at the appropriate time (Pedersen & Hansen, 2022).

Discussion

The dominance of scripted, teacher-centered curricula in many education systems highlights the need for flexibility in instructional approaches to foster an engaging and inclusive learning environment. To achieve this, teachers must be well-versed in curriculum theory, enabling them to adapt these structured curricula to be more inclusive, culturally responsive, and attuned to each learner's needs. With a deep understanding of curriculum theory, teachers can plan and execute differentiated instructional strategies that support the unique abilities, interests, and paces of each student, facilitating a child-centered approach (Adewusi et al., 2023; Fousteri & Foti, 2024). By leveraging this expertise, educators can establish a classroom atmosphere that respects and values individual learner voices, creating meaningful learning experiences that motivate students to engage actively and collaboratively (Stein et al., 2024).

In a child-centered classroom, appreciating students' funds of knowledge—prior experiences, cultural backgrounds, and family insights—is critical in establishing an equitable and supportive educational environment (Kim, 2024; McDevitt, 2023). Acknowledging these diverse backgrounds empowers students to connect their experiences to classroom learning, promoting academic and personal growth. This approach, as Gaete et al. note, encourages not only active student engagement but also the involvement of families in school activities, helping teachers understand each student's unique background and learning needs (Gaete et al., 2023). This partnership fosters a more inclusive and relational classroom dynamic, where students feel valued and are more likely to take ownership of their learning journeys.

Teachers' knowledge of curriculum theory further equips them to integrate instructional practices that enhance cognitive, emotional, and social development (Astiwi et al., 2024; Iksal et al., 2024). This requires teachers to be creative and flexible, adapting instructional methods to accommodate a range of learner needs and preferences. By doing so, teachers create a dynamic learning space that prioritizes students' diverse abilities and fosters a supportive learning community. Effective implementation of curriculum theory ensures that teachers are not simply imparting knowledge but facilitating a transformative educational experience that prepares students to be active, engaged learners capable of critical thinking and problem-solving—skills essential for success beyond the classroom (Zhu et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

For effective delivery of instruction, teachers must establish relationships between learners' previous experiences and their new learning to facilitate the seamless transfer of knowledge. To promote an easy transfer of knowledge, curriculum theory should be modified to align with children's daily experiences by building children's education on their existing knowledge and interests to enable the learners to experience less difficulty in assimilating whatever is being taught. Teachers must utilize their understanding of curriculum theory to carefully consider and adapt to learners' interests and needs, allowing them to engage and express their thoughts in the learning process in an active manner. Educators with a good understanding of the curriculum strive to adapt it to suit the learners' needs and interests. Additionally, teachers need to use the available resources that learners have at their disposal

to strengthen their understanding of the subject matter being taught. For education to be meaningful to children, the curriculum should be centered around them and not by imposing what adults want on them. Children's education should align with their needs rather than what adults desire.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The author declares no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Also, the author attests that this article is free of plagiarism. All sources were properly cited, and this article has not been previously published.

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